

8

STORY BY
Rhythm Aida
ART BY
nauribon

Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: A Sweet Life

“Open your mouth please, Master Slowe! Yes, nice and wide.”

“Oink, oink!”

Okay. I think my first priority is answering this question: am I dreaming, or am I dreaming?

Let’s lay out the evidence here. I am here lying in bed because I’m feeling under the weather right now. I’ve buried myself in my bed for an entire day in hopes I’ll feel better. Then, when it came time to eat, Charlotte came over and held out a spoon, just like this...

“Here you go. Say ‘aah.’”

“Oi...Oink!” I let out a muffled snort as I swallowed.

Are you seeing this? Charlotte is almost like a mother bird feeding her baby chick with the way she’s reaching out a slender, supple arm. Her delicate, silky hair is almost blinding me with its radiance.

“Hmm? Master Slowe, are you all right? Your face is even redder than before!”

“Gimme more food, Charlotte,” I snorted.

I didn’t put up a struggle as Charlotte fed me. My face was beet red—at this point, I could hardly tell whether the heat in my cheeks was out of embarrassment or an actual fever.

“Does it taste good, Master Slowe?”

A nonsensical noise escaped me. “Oink, oiiiink!” I’d *meant* to say that this was great—how could I *ever* think otherwise?—but in my exhilaration, I found my ability to form coherent words lacking. If my friends at Kirsch ever saw me in such a humiliating state, I might’ve died on the spot from shame.

I let out a couple of happy snorts.

“There’s still plenty left, so please take your time.”

I made a happy little snort, a hint of relief tinged the sound.

Charlotte chuckled. “That’s all it took for you to simmer right down, huh? You’re adorable, Master Slowe.”

I felt content, and a gentle warmth slowly seeped into my chest, not unlike that of a comfortable hearth. Though I usually had mixed feelings about the word “adorable,” it didn’t sound half bad right now. I was willing to bet that I had a downright gross expression on my face. *If someone like Alicia saw me like this... I can’t even imagine what kind of insults she’d cook up.*

“Your cold has persisted for quite a while...” Charlotte sighed.

“Ah, that reminds me! I heard that in a faraway foreign land, people say you can recover from a persistent cold by passing it down to someone else. So please excuse me for what I’m about to do.”

“Oink?! Oiiink!” The sound of an overwhelmed pig grated on my nerves, as if I weren’t, in fact, talking about myself. Surely everybody saw this freakout coming, though, because Charlotte had changed into her pajamas, and she was trying to *wriggle into bed with me*.

“Wow, you’re really burning up. Come closer... Stick to me and let me take that fever from you. Here, just like this.”

“Oi... Oiiink!!!!!!”

And then my whole body jerked forward, kicking me right out of my dreams. I inhaled sharply as awareness crept back over me.

Yeah... So it really was a dream, after all. It was too good to be true. Remember, Slowe, just a while ago, you were the most fearsome, problematic student at school: the blackhearted Piggy Duke. Up to this point, I’ve kept my feelings for Charlotte under lock and key during school. Of course it’s a dream. Duh.

But... I’d want to have that dream again, if possible.

Just as I started wriggling around, a pleasant, mellow voice came from somewhere beside me. “Master Slowe... You suddenly started struggling in your sleep. Did you have a nightmare, perhaps?” It was Charlotte.

“Am I still dreaming?”

“You mentioned that you had your fill, and then in the next moment, you were sound asleep! Don’t you remember?”

Charlotte stared at me, her head tilted and wide, blinking eyes betraying her confusion. A book sat upon her knees, likely one she had been reading moments ago, though her eyes were fixed on me.

This was when I realized a ground-breaking truth: this wasn’t a dream. The scene before my eyes told it all. Just like what happened in my dream, Charlotte was right here—right by my side.

“G-Good... Good mo—oink!” *Ack! That was embarrassing. I sure messed that up.*

“This isn’t the best time for ‘good morning,’ Master Slowe! It’s still nighttime. Please go back to sleep and stay asleep! Come on!”

She pinned me down and tucked me right back into bed. In times like this, Charlotte wouldn’t take “no” for an answer.

“Oioioink... Oink!” I stammered.

“What’s wrong? Ah, do you want to stay awake, maybe? Did you have a nightmare? It’s not unheard of to have all kinds of weird dreams when you’re sick because you feel vulnerable. That happens to me sometimes, so I completely understand what you’re going

through.”

Okay. So, as you can see, I'm down with a cold. A strange cold. It's not even cold season. Even everyone's go-to water spell, Heal, doesn't do a dang thing against something like this because it's not exactly something that magic can heal.

You might be thinking, "Hmm, Slowe, you're always full of life and energy with no shortage of snorts, so how did you end up like this?" Weeell... I happen to have, oh I don't know, about a thousand ideas why!

My guess is that I was trying too hard and for too long. Staying all tense and alert like that must've done me in.

"Are you having trouble falling asleep, Master Slowe?"

"Oooink..." I muttered dejectedly.

I probably have long since reached my limit. In the past, I endured, endured, and endured even more, repeatedly shedding blood, sweat, and tears to guide this world onto the path of peace. However, that all changed a few days ago, because the Great Spirit of Darkness swore that she won't go off starting wars anymore. Not to mention the cherry on the cake: the queen and a few other people have discovered Charlotte's identity, but have promised that they won't make this information public.

All the things weighing on my shoulders vanished in one go. Relief and reassurance took their place, and the whiplash from that caused the delicate balance of my heart to tip to the other extreme. If I had to pinpoint what caused my condition to plummet so low, it's probably that.

"Then would you like a snack or something, Master Slowe?"

I snorted in delight.

With that in mind, all this bed rest is a perfect breath of fresh air during this recovery period from all my struggles. It gives me a good opportunity to reflect on and organize all that's happened.

"I'm back, and I come with many things from the dining hall! All the cooks were very cooperative. They said that they would make you anything you wanted."

"Huh. Things have changed. I guess that's the life of a celebrity for you, oink."

"You're the great Dragon Slayer that saved this school! No one can thank you enough."

Other than that, well... There are still some loose ends left. For instance, what should I do about the Great Spirit of Fire inside Shuya? I guess I can take things slowly on that front. What I want most right now is to indulge in these blissful days... Charlotte, always by my side. Charlotte, nursing me back to health. This is the very definition of happiness.

"O-Open wide!"

“Oink, oink.” *This is the life. It’s paradise levels of sweet. I’m so content that I’m starting to think that those painful, bitter days were worth it.* “Oink!”

After all, Charlotte reciprocated the feelings I have towards her. Just thinking about it makes me feel butterflies in my stomach. Honestly, I still suspect that it’s a dream sometimes.

“Charlotte... Charlotte, oink,” I whined.

“What’s wrong? Do you still have a headache?”

“If I eat so much, I’ll grow fat, oiiink.”

“That’s okay. You worked really hard, Master Slowe, so you can fatten up. It’s all right,” Charlotte said with a tender smile. I could have sworn that I saw an angel.

Until now, she had always doubled down on my efforts, pressuring me to lose weight, but suddenly she’d changed her tune. She was so kind now.

“Wh-Why is it all right, oiiink?”

“Listen. Your popularity doesn’t stop at the school chefs. If you trimmed down and grew any more handsome than you already are, other girls might steal your heart away,” Charlotte sighed.

“Th-That’s nothing to worry about. My heart fully and wholly belongs to you, Charlotte,” I snorted giddily. *Oh, spirits above... What am I even saying?!*

Charlotte’s face grew into a bashful smile that reminded me of the first blossoms in spring, and then we were both blushing redder than ripe strawberries. “Y-You don’t know how happy that makes me,” Charlotte stammered.

O-Okay, no more. I’ll explode at this rate. All right, let’s change the topic. I can’t get used to this sickeningly, cotton candy-sweet atmosphere, and it’s taking its toll on me...

“Ch-Charlotte...”

“Yes?”

“This just occurred to me, but... Remember our exchange student from the Dustour Empire? Has he managed to adapt to our school?”

“Oh, you mean Lord Neon?”

“Yeah, that guy. I want to know about him.”

“He came to Daryth as a representative of Dustour, so at first, I assumed that he was a refined, upstanding person, but...” Charlotte hesitated. “There aren’t many positive rumors about him, or at least, not among the ones I’ve heard.”

Charlotte’s reply was noticeably vague. In fact, it almost seemed as if she was choosing her words carefully.

The exchange student from the Dustour Empire, if you couldn’t recall, was the man who had so confidently introduced himself by declaring that he had come to this land to *make friends*.

“He has an inconceivable status, but despite that... How do I put it? He’s a bit of a ladies’ man,” Charlotte explained.

“Oh... I’d heard that he was hitting on girls a while ago and that it pissed off a lot of the guys, now that I think about it... But in terms of size, Daryth is a puddle compared to the ocean that is Dustour, and he’s their *imperial prince*. If something spicy does happen with him, marrying into riches wouldn’t even begin to describe it. So the girls were giddy, and the guys were peeved. Wasn’t that what happened at first?”

Charlotte gave me an incredulous stare. “For someone who hasn’t left their room this whole time, you’re *very* well-informed about the happenings at school.”

“Well, Tina often sneaks over and pays me a visit, and she’d tell me all kinds of stuff.”

“Huh...? Wait a minute. If my memory serves me right, didn’t you brag not too long ago that, ‘My eyes and heart are devoted to Charlotte alone, so I swear that I will never, *ever* be alone with another girl! Impossible!’”

I choked.

I had been on top of the world over the fact that Charlotte returned my feelings, and as a result, I *might* have let my mouth run like crazy. I remembered that. And indeed, my exact words back then had been along the lines of “You’re the only one for me, Charlotte!” or “Being alone with another girl in a locked room? Unthinkable!”

Um... Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

I retracted my earlier statement. “Huh? Maybe I remembered it wrong... For some reason, I’m getting drowsy, oink.”

I covered my head with the sheets and hid from the tense silence that hung between us.

Anyway, my sweet, sweet time with Charlotte was like a trip to paradise, to put it mildly.

After getting dressed and ready to face the world again, I left the dorm. The autumn air was a little chilly, but then, I took a direct hit from the sunlight. “Owoink!” I cried out.

A refreshing, clear autumn day welcomed me, and I sucked up as much of the crisp air as I could.

“Back in action, oink!”

I had been confined to my bed for nearly a whole week. It had been ages since I last had such a lengthy break. *Hm? You’re asking whether my blackhearted Piggy Duke days count as a break? To be honest, I might not have seemed like it, but I was tense the entire time.*

“All righty then, the first thing I should do is head over to the

dining hall because I'm hungry, oink."

Back in the day, the loud thuds of my footsteps followed me wherever I went... How nostalgic. I've trimmed down thoroughly compared to then. Now I'm light on my feet. Hmm, I think I did get a little out of shape after being on bed rest for so long, but I can work on that steadily and tune my body back to tip-top shape.

I spotted a maid in a frilly pinafore dress peeking out from the entrance of the dining hall and stopped in my tracks. "What's that girl doing?" I murmured.

The moment our eyes met, she frantically bowed her head and shrunk back into the building in a flash. *Is it because of me? Is she avoiding me?* Doubt settled in, and I started to become paranoid. *No, that doesn't make sense. Lately, I'm the last person that would do things to cause a maid to hate me...*

Something felt a little off once I entered the dining hall. "Hmm?" I scrunched my eyebrows together. "Why are there so few people around?"

Usually, at this time of morning, this place would be brimming with people. But today the vacant seats were glaringly obvious. *Did something happen while I was indisposed?*

"Ah." I spotted a familiar face, but there was also something not quite right with her. She was speed-eating. She'd stuffed her cheeks like a hamster as she munched noisily on her food in large mouthfuls while being alert to her surroundings. She acted almost as if a monster would attack her if she didn't eat fast enough.

"Tina, it's not good for you to wolf your food down that quickly," I warned as I leisurely sat on the seat next to her.

Tina, a first-year student of Kirsch, jolted and froze, perhaps because I had called out to her so suddenly. She startled like a little forest critter and was just as adorable as one. Soon, she realized that the perpetrator wasn't just anybody but me, and her face immediately lit up with the light of a thousand suns.

Jumping up to her feet and grinning from ear to ear, she yelled, "L-Looord Deeenning! Yooou're baaack!!!" I could almost see her imaginary tail wagging ferociously. "You're finally back! Now that you're around, we finally stand a chance against him!"



I blinked. “Huh?”

“I’ve honestly had enough of his pompousness and lack of consideration for other people! Even someone as tolerant as me can’t let this go on! Don’t you agree, Lord Denning?!”

“Hold up, Tina. Please calm down first and explain what’s going on. Who do you mean by ‘him’?”

“Of *course* it’s...” Tina’s voice lowered to a hush. “Keep it down, but naturally, only Lord Neon fits the bill...!”

“Uh... By any chance, does he have anything to do with why the dining hall’s a ghost town now?”

I mean, look at the people who just came in. They’re also acting weird. A bunch of students had peeked in the windows to see what was happening inside before they’d tiptoed into the dining hall nervously. It was almost as if they were checking to see whether there was an orc in this hall.

“He...has *everything* to do with it!!!”

I’d only just recovered from my cold, so I was taking a break from my morning classes. Now I was in the gym that I had constructed a while ago, sitting on the pipes laden with dust and dirt as I steadily stretched to work out the stiffness.

I’m sooo out of shape. In this state, I probably wouldn’t even be able to put up a good fight against a single orc. Just after I had that thought, though, my brain stuttered. *Sorry, that was a lie. Mister Orcs are nothing. They’re a piece of cake.*

Then, my thoughts trailed to the exchange student from Dustour, Prince Neon, who had made an unforgettable entrance during his meet-and-greet. “That day when Prince Neon introduced himself, he seemed like a very respectable person, but now...” I sighed. “Who would’ve thought that he’s an oh-so-mighty pain-in-the-neck who brought his fiascos overseas with him?”

During his introductions, he had been dignified and commanding. In fact, the moment I had met his eyes, I had the impression that I was about to be served on a platter.

“You really can’t judge a book by its cover, huh...?”

Tina had this to say about him: “*He constantly pesters us, and by constantly, I mean constantly! He even acts all natural about it! That man is the imperial prince of the famed Dustour Empire, right?! We’re really high-strung around him, but that doesn’t seem like it bothers him at all! That’s why fewer and fewer students have been coming over to the dining hall! Did you know that man would randomly sit next to you without warning?!*”

Who would have thought? Turns out the reason the dining hall was so

deserted in the morning was because Prince Neon keeps coming up to people!

That hadn't been the end of Tina's tirade. *"Okay, it would have made sense if he only went to chat up noble students at this school, but no! He even persistently tries to start conversations with me, a mere commoner! Even the maids and cleaners in the dining hall aren't spared! Frankly speaking, everyone is more afraid of Prince Neon than they were of you when you were a human orc! What if we do something rude and he suddenly cuts us in half or something?!"*

Tina had made her point very aggressively back in the dining hall, stopping just short of grabbing me by the collar to drive it home. Somewhere along the line, the maids had joined her to air their grievances about the prince to me. They had been so menacing and zealous that I hadn't been able to cut in at all. I couldn't even finish half my plate.

"That's why we've been waiting for your return, Lord Denning! In this school, there's only one person left that can oppose that idiotic prince, and that's you! Ah! Look at the time! Classes are starting soon, so please excuse me!"

"Oh, Tina..." I sighed. "What am I supposed to do about all this? Why me?"

Finishing up my morning stroll, I returned to the boys' dorm. I still hadn't fully recovered, so I came back without going to the dining hall for lunch. However, if Tina wasn't exaggerating earlier, the dining hall would've likely been just as deserted at lunch as it was at breakfast.

From the sound of it all, Prince Neon was stirring up an outrageous metaphorical storm here at Kirsch. Charlotte had implied that he was quite...the character too, but he might have surpassed my initial expectations. *Actually, they say that he's even more infamous than me during my blackhearted Piggy Duke days, so he must be pretty bad.*

I'd heard that Charlotte had prepared a light meal for me. While I was fighting my cold, I could only stomach bean soup and other bland foods, so I'd been looking forward to it. "I'm hungry, oink..."

Climbing up the stairs, I made my way back to the fourth floor, and there, I spotted someone standing in front of the door to my room. He had well-kept brown hair and clear eyes the color of tranquil seas. One noteworthy detail was the crimson coat that hung around his frame, a symbol that represented his affiliation with House Denning.

It took me a long moment to recognize him.

"Hey there, Young Master."

But then, staring at the virtuous-looking man with his lips pressed

into a thin, straight line, I remembered a name. The man at the door was Claude, my former knight.

Chapter 1: Prince Neon

I came to an abrupt halt on reflex at the sight of the man standing with impressive poise in front of my door.

“Claude? What are you doing *here*?”

His face, which had once given me the impression of a humble and taciturn nature, was now sharp and refined like a mature man with many stories to tell. His short, well-kept brown hair was peppered with grays here and there. Nostalgia overwhelmed me as I looked at him—his name was one that I could never forget either.

This man was one of my knights, once. Unyielding and responsible to the core, he had been on the other side of many an argument with Silva, who had been a commoner before his knighting.

“Our little Charlotte shared news of your recovery, Young Master.”

Ah, so Charlotte arranged for this surprise. That’s why she told me to return to my room instead of heading to the dining hall. That reminds me, Shuya did ramble on and on about my acquaintance and a former knight or something in the school assembly a while ago. I came down with a cold quickly after that, so it completely slipped my mind.

He continued. “Please do not think ill of our little Charlotte. I was the one who asked this of her.”

“I would never condemn her for something like this,” I declared. “Well, you’re here anyway, Claude, you might as well come in.”

A meal for two was laid out on the table. Clearly, this was for me and Claude. The soup and bread were steaming, fresh from the oven. The nutritious dishes were all easy to digest, though that did nothing to stop their mouth-watering aroma from enticing me. Charlotte had probably carefully selected each dish keeping in mind I’d so recently been sick—I could feel her thoughtfulness with every dish, and my stomach rumbled loudly.

“Oops...” Well, I’m back to full health now, and I also had a quick walk earlier, so I can’t blame my stomach for protesting. But... Honestly? Right now, things are pretty tense, and I’m a bit tied for words in front of my old friend, so couldn’t my stomach have chosen a better time to do that?!

After a moment of silence, I said, “Shall we eat, then?”

“Yes, let’s.”

And that was how we ended up sitting around the dining table.

I nodded to myself. *This food is good. It's flavorful, rich, and carefully made.*

The downside of this meal was that there was a sense of distance between the two of us. *I shouldn't have expected anything else. It's been so long since then.* Silva had grown into an adult since those youthful days in my service. But this guy had started off as an adult, and time had made a different mark on him.

"Claude, you seem like you've aged a bit."

"Well, I have crossed into my thirties and have experienced many things on my journey. More importantly, Young Master, are you in good health now?"

"Anyone would be alive and kicking after such a long rest. I'm completely fine now. I have to say, though, I never thought you'd become a teacher at school."

I've been thinking about that. I've never heard of someone from House Denning becoming a professor before, regardless of whether it's by blood or by service. Well, our relentless, brutal training might be useful in the sense that it can spur on growth in abilities, but... Kirsch is a lenient place. I can't imagine a world where the students here could put up with our ways.

"That being said, if we have to choose someone from House Denning to be a professor, I think you're the best candidate, Claude. You've always been good at teaching. Plus, in terms of character, you're significantly more accommodating and approachable compared to the rest of the knights serving under House Denning. Had it been anyone else, the students here would have run for the hills long ago."

He had always been like that, a man who wasn't truly a good match for House Denning, a place filled with ruffians. Everyone around him were muscle heads, but he had been the exception who had executed all his tasks flawlessly.

"I may have been a jack of all trades—an average one at that—but I am still a master of none. After all, I have few memorable traits, if any."

"Looks like your lack of self-confidence hasn't changed at all... At any rate, Claude, I'm glad you're doing well. But, hey, there's one thing that I'm curious about. I heard a rumor that my siblings offered to take you into their service after all that happened, but... You didn't want to become any of their knights, huh?"

By "after all that happened," I was referring to my blackhearted Piggy Duke days. After seeing my appalling state, many people deserted me.

"Your noble brothers and sisters have sought me out indeed, but Young Master, I wished to devote my life to House Denning. As a

result, I was able to venture into the big wide world. A shame that all the jobs allocated to me were undesirable ones that nobody else would willingly accept, however.”

“Uh, wouldn’t you call that being treated like a doormat?”

“Manners, Young Master, would advise you to avoid pointing that out?”

“...Yeah, good point.”

Though I didn’t know the details, it seemed that Claude had frequently been used as the convenient scapegoat. *We’re never short of people who see value in a knight of House Denning just from that title alone, whether it be in the world of nobles, the world of commoners, or even foreign nations. House Denning has probably used Claude as a tool to gain the favor of many.* His voice clearly betrayed the hardships he’d suffered, but he didn’t seem to regret much about it all.

“Young Master, I was only able to adapt this way of thinking because I was once your knight, so I have you to thank for that. Though there were many pains along the way, it was a delightful journey.”

“But... You’re a *professor* this time... Looks like they’re running you ragged and taking you for granted.”

In all history, none of the people intertwined tightly with the name of House Denning had ever taken up the post of a professor at Kirsch. Direct descendants were mostly fated to become battle fodder, and only the equally bloodthirsty were willing to become knights directly assigned to them.

“In truth, it isn’t as bad as you might think. For the past few years, the majority of my work centered around escorting people of affluence. These days, there is quite a large demand for knights of House Denning, the pride and joy of Daryth, from nobles in various countries as bodyguards. As the black sheep, naturally, I was assigned to the task.”

“Black sheep...? Jeez, Claude, be honest. If you have something against me, just tell me the truth.”

“No, not at all,” he said, with a grin like the refreshing breeze after a sleepy dawn.

Many members of House Denning were bitter towards me. Due to the black smear on his record for having served as my knight, he probably experienced many more troubles and bumpy roads than he really had to.

“Young Master, I once took everything seriously. I was a knight so set in my ways that describing me as old-fashioned is an understatement. Now, after taking many detours along the way, I have started to discover the joys of life, as well as the exquisite taste of wine. I am a new man, and...” here, Claude smiled wryly, “likely, you

would no longer have the opportunity to tease me to get me to think for myself a little more.”

“That reminds me of our first meeting. It all started when I rescued you from a giant boar that scared you stiff... Back then, all you saw was that little piglet near its mother and were completely lost about what to do, weren’t you?”

“I do recall such an event. Looking back on it now, it is quite a funny story.”

“You say that coolly, but you can’t hide the redness on your face. Okay, let’s move on to the serious stuff, Claude. Why were you dispatched to Kirsch? Don’t tell me... Are you here to monitor me?”

“While being your chaperone sounds pleasant and fulfilling, Young Master, that is unfortunately not the case. Royal Knights made a temporary stay in this magic school, yes? In these times, it seems that we are all wanting for talented new blood, whether it be the Royal Knights or House Denning.”

“Ah, headhunting, then...”

“The Order of Royal Knights has begun recruiting students earlier than they are traditionally supposed to. House Denning isn’t the type to take that lying down. I have already begun collecting information, and I have set my sights on several candidates, but...”

“You’re doing this on your own authority, right? You make fast work of your tasks, as always.”

“It is to the benefit of House Denning, and by extension, this country.”

Though there was a slight haggard feel to him, he looked like someone who lived his life to the fullest. Claude had journeyed to many places in the world as a bodyguard for influential people, and he probably was much more knowledgeable about it than I was.

We exchanged lighthearted banter for a while, and then, I brought up something that suddenly occurred to me.

“Claude, there’s something I want to ask.”

“And what would that be?”

“I’m sure you know about Prince Neon. He mentioned that he came here to make friends. That’s a lie, right?”

The moment Claude heard that name, he grimaced ever so slightly. It seemed that even to Claude, Prince Neon wasn’t exactly a model student.

“That would be my guess, yes,” he said slowly.

“Do you know what he’s up to?”

“I do not. However, I *am* willing to bet that he did not come for a heartwarming pastime in the form of ‘making friends,’ as he calls it.”

“Agreed. It would be ridiculous for a prince of the *Dustour Empire*

to come to the south just for that during times like these.”

He was the imperial crown prince, mind you, one of the most powerful nations on the continent. Why in the world had he come here to Daryth—to Kirsch Mage Institute, of all places?

I frowned as I continued. “Claude, Prince Neon attends your classes too, right? What’s your opinion of him?”

Begrudgingly, Claude admitted, “I cannot get a read on him. Sometimes, I suspect that it is exactly as the rumors say, that he is a foolish prince. At Kirsch, he is apparently said to be the second coming of you, Young Master.”

Wow, rumors like that are going around? Big yikes.

After hearing what Claude had to say about him, however, there was one conclusion I could make. “Well, if he’s just like what they gossip about him, I don’t want to get involved with him at all.”

Tina also had nothing positive to say about him, and I had seen in the dining hall that students now shied away from him. Prince Neon had only been here for a *week*, but that had been enough time for him to cause all this trouble. *I think it’s fair to want to stay the hell away from him.*

“He might have surprisingly good chemistry with you, Young Master,” Claude quipped.

“What are you implying...?” I grumbled.

Moments later, Claude made a brisk exit, claiming that he had classes to attend to in the afternoon. I asked him what in the world he was teaching, and according to him, he was teaching the ways of combat through practice. The combat techniques he taught were, bluntly speaking, a brawling style, disregarding anything like honor codes or knightly conventions. Apparently, though, it seemed surprisingly popular with the students, and he himself had been taken aback by that.

I’ll be honest here. I don’t want to have anything to do with Prince Neon, who’s stirring up a sensation inside Kirsch. I only want to live happily with Charlotte. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. So I’ll keep my head down at school and keep out of trouble.

Or at least, that was what I had decided I would do. But sometimes life just wasn’t nice, because my first real encounter with the prince in the rumors was just around the corner.

“Has anyone here ever personally experienced a fear that burns like flame licking at your feet, one that just might swallow you whole? Or a dread that threatens to sever you in half? Nobody knows what the future holds! You never know what might be waiting for you down the line!”

The classroom setting almost felt foreign to me, likely because of how long I'd been away on bed rest. The first lecture I chose to return to was taught by a certain woman.

"I have received permission from the headmaster to share my experience with all of you. And yes, I am aware that some of your guardians might show disapproval towards what I have to say, but an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!"

The woman in question was Professor Arle, who had been confined by No Face for a lengthy period of time. The professor who'd taught me in my first year was actually not Professor Arle at all, but an imperial agent named No Face in disguise. That was a widely known fact among the students at Kirsch.

"Whenever I think back to the time when I was locked away by No Face, I still cannot stop my hair from standing on its end. I shall confess the truth. For several months, an arisen held me hostage within a world of my own making. I was trapped in an endless dream."

I looked around to gauge everyone's reactions. All the other students had this look on their faces that practically said, "Not this again." Alicia hadn't even bothered to bring her textbooks to this class, which seemed rather extreme. *That girl has no enthusiasm at all.*

"The arisen have no physical bodies. Humans require a catalyst to control one of these monsters! With No Face, she placed a catalyst of darkness in the cell where she confined me, and—"

The arisen were frail monsters that put humans into a coma and then proceeded to seize control of their freewill after a long investment of time. These arisen had no bodies, and were thought of as the residue of living beings. They would show their victims a special dream—some even called it a lullaby—that lured its listeners into the world of oblivion. Professor Arle was single-mindedly trying to drill the danger of the arisen into our heads, but the students seemed utterly put off by her behavior. But in my opinion, this had its own merits, so I happily listened to the professor's lecture.

"Perhaps because of such an experience, I have awoken darkness magic. Before I gained this element, I used to think that this branch of magic was wicked, but it is very effective against monsters. Now, everyone, know that you should fear the monsters of the darkness. These creatures are lurking right beside you all!"

A familiar voice interrupted. "P-Professor, ma'am, uh... This doesn't sound like Magic Studies anymore."

Of course it's Shuya. Only he could be this brave. Look at Alicia sitting next to him... She's already nodding off!

"Mister Newkern..." the professor said slowly. "Do you doubt the importance of my lecture?"

“Huh? Um, that’s not what I mean at all.”

“Listen, and listen well. By sharing my experience with everyone, I am imparting survival techniques unto you. But it isn’t my problem, Mister Newkern. If you ever get attacked by a monster of darkness, it would be too late for you to regret not listening and applying what I taught in my class.”

Overwhelmed by the professor’s zest, Shuya backed down. “Y-Yes... You’re right. Spells that work against monsters of darkness, right...”

He’s technically an adventurer, so what Professor Arle is teaching should be unexpectedly useful in his case, I thought with a sigh, tutting internally. *Right now, all the other students probably think that No Face taught this class better. Or that she at least did a decent job.*

“Well now, it seems that we are nearing the end of class. I shall give you this week’s homework. Hmm, let’s see... How about you all write a paper about the ogre subclass of monsters, also called the monstrous humanoids? I want ten pages at the minimum.”

A chorus of “Seriously?!” echoed throughout the entire classroom.

Everyone left the classroom grumbling. Homework, it seemed, was equally unpopular no matter where or when you were.

A student sighed. “Professor Arle changed so much. She was much better before!”

“Oh, don’t say such nonsense. It wasn’t the real professor before, and No Face is a criminal.”

“You have a point, but you know...” Another sigh.

Professor Arle’s classes were much more passionate compared to the ones held by the old grandpas at Kirsch. She truly had something she wanted us to learn in her lectures, not just following her job description, but well... It was a shame that everyone didn’t get it. *It’s not every day that you get to hear about the dreams caused by an arisen, so they’re wasting quite a precious opportunity.*

“Oh, it’s you, Slowe. Have you recovered from your cold?”

“And it’s you, Alicia. Luckily, I’m back in good health.”

Alicia hummed, sounding disinterested. “You look healthier than before, so you might as well stay in bed for a few more days. Don’t you agree?”

“Jeez... That’s not a nice thing to say to someone who has been cooped up in bed for ages.”

The girl who came up to me was Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista, the other royal exchange student taking up residence here at Kirsch. Her sharp tongue was as cutting as always.

Suddenly, she shoved something into my hand. I took a look and saw that it was a small, orange-colored candy. With a hint of redness

dusted on her cheeks, she left the classroom as she said, “I-I’ll see you around then... It’s not like I was worried about you or anything! Not at all!”

Her clumsy, awkward kindness warmed my heart ever so slightly, like a small ray of sunlight.

I remained sitting as I watched everyone head into the corridor while they griped about Professor Arle’s assignment, and when I was the last one left, I stood up.

But just as I was about to head into the corridor as well...

“May I have a moment, Mister Denning?”

...someone caught hold of the hem of my clothes.

It turned out to be Professor Arle. *I’m...a little scared of her right now because her lecture earlier defied all my expectations.* “P-Professor, may I help you?”

“Mister Denning, I wish to express my gratitude directly to you. I cannot thank you enough. It is only because of you that I was able to return to Kirsch.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Professor. I only did what anyone else would have in my position,” I said humbly.

She didn’t take special time off after what happened, instead immediately coming back to Kirsch. This woman is much tougher than she looks. On top of that, judging by what she taught in her lecture, her encounter with the mercenary must have changed something inside her.

“I want to thank you,” she insisted. “Is there anything you want? If it’s within my power—”

I paused, considering. “Then, how about permission to be exempt from homework?”

“Hmm...” The professor didn’t sound convinced. “Giving you special treatment would be a little...”

“Let’s see... The ogre subclass of monsters, which take up a humanoid form, can be roughly sorted into four big categories. Zombies, the undead humanoids. Ogres, the humanoid monsters. Vampires, the bloodsucking humanoids. Jinn, the humanoid spirits. In the south, there have only been sightings of zombies and vampires at the moment, and in the case of the jinn, some are even suspicious that they are extinct. If you wish for me to talk in more detail, I can elaborate, but that is the gist of it, right?”

Professor Arle’s glasses glinted at those words. The answer I had just given cut right to the heart of the assignment the professor had given out.

I all but skipped to my next lecture. *If you’re wondering about my good mood, well, Professor Arle excused me from the homework after hearing what I had to say earlier! Score!*

“Oink!” I hummed. *Maybe things will look up from now on, and*

everything will go smoothly in my life. I mean, I don't have to worry about the Royal Knights suddenly appearing and declaring their hate for me or the witch of the north showing up either.

"Oi—Oi—Oiiiachoo!" I sneezed. Huh, maybe I haven't fully recovered yet. Or maybe someone's talking behind my back...

"Hey! You take that back!"

Hmm, that doesn't sound peaceful. Is someone arguing in the corridor or something? Sheesh, we're in broad daylight. Do they have no shame?

That voice continued. "Who gave you the right to mock Alicia?!"

For a moment, the gears in my brain ground to a halt. All right, one of the people arguing sounds veery familiar. That was Shuya. Him again? Seriously? I thought he matured a bit compared to before, but he's pretty quick to prove me wrong. Of course, I'm not going to involve myself in this. The saying goes "let sleeping dogs lie" for good reason.

A derisive sneer followed. "A barking dog never bites. I find that it describes you perfectly."

That irritated Shuya even more. "What did you just say?! Say it again, I dare you!"

I'd originally planned to pass by like the innocent bystander I was, but I stopped in my tracks when I saw the person on the other side of the argument. It wasn't just anyone—it was Neon Dustour, a household name at Kirsch as of late and the idiotic prince from the rumors.

I tried to placate Shuya, who had completely lost it, hoping to head him off before he grabbed Prince Neon by the collar the way it looked like he was itching to do. "Shuya! Calm down!"

I should really reconsider my relationship with Shuya from now on, come to think of it. This guy's nothing but a big troublemaker.

"I have only spoken the truth. That damsel of a princess belongs to the pig, does she not?"

"Belongs to the pig?!" Don't think that you can say whatever you want just because you're a prince!"

"But it was, in fact, the truth at one point in the past, no? Have I said anything wrong?"

"You're not wrong, but you didn't have to go out of your way to say it to her face!"

My skin started to crawl the more I listened and the more I understood the gist of what had happened. I can't help it... He said Alicia "belonged to the pig," so that means they're butting heads because of me!

Alicia doesn't seem like she wants to waste any time on this, but Shuya looks like he's about to take a swing at the guy right about now, and that's

a big problem. *I can't turn a blind eye to this.*

"Hey..." I began slowly. "I've been listening to you for a while now. Do you have a beef with me or something?"

That caught the prince's attention. "Hm?"

I'll have you know that I'm the fearsome Piggy Duke who used to scare naughty children into silence. Nobody would dare call me that title to my face anymore, though. Not when I'm the great dragon-slaying hero and all.

There was a slight pause before realization dawned on the man's face. "Ahhh! Are you perhaps...!" Prince Neon had finally realized I was there, apparently.

Huh, I thought, sizing him up. Makes sense now.

After getting to see him in the flesh, I could easily deduce why everyone wasn't fond of the guy. This prince had a fire inside him, one so scalding that it seemed like it could burn anyone or anything that got too close into ash. His eyes were windows into an unyielding soul. Looking into them gave the impression that he could do no wrong and that *others* were actually the ones guilty of a crime instead. This man was powerful, and he had an attitude to boot. His very presence was enough to make people feel inferior compared to this man among men.

However, one thing made him stick out like a sore thumb: his lack of a school uniform. He wore some kind of ethnic wear, refined in both color and luster, that gave him an exquisite allure. *Wow. Yeah, he's going to stand out in those.*

"So you are the fabled Piggy Duke, Slowe Denning! I have been anticipating our meeting!" he said with zeal as he grabbed my arm in a firm grip.

Uh, Mister Idiotic Prince over here, why do you look so excited?

"I have heard that you have been feeling unwell since the day after my arrival! What good timing you have... I was just thinking that I should pay you a visit soon in person!"

And now, I know exactly why he's putting the dining hall out of business. How do I describe it? Prince Neon seems as simple-minded and innocent as a child. It's really throwing me off.

I was the one who had, in no uncertain terms, smashed the Great Spirit of Darkness's wish for her beloved Dustour Empire into pieces. Prince Neon, meanwhile, was the second imperial prince of said beloved empire. It didn't take a genius to realize why I had planned on avoiding him as much as possible during his stay. If the prince knew that I was the one who had taken the wind out of Dustour's sails, I could safely assume that there was a low chance of receiving favorable treatment from this guy.

"The rumors all say the Piggy Duke is known as an enthusiast of

scavenging for food from the ground! Piggy Duke, you are born to one of the most powerful families inside the Country of Knights! Act like it, and do not commit such an unseemly act ever again!”

“H-Hey, don’t mock me like that! If you’re only here to bad-mouth me, don’t blame me when I send you flying!”

He barked a hearty laugh. “Send me flying, you say? Piggy Duke, you are a man with a great sense of humor!”

I stared at him, speechless. “Seriously, what do I even do with this guy...?”

However, seeing the radiant smile he aimed in my direction, I didn’t have the heart to work up any hostility. Though he repeatedly called me “Piggy Duke,” he said it in such a way that it almost seemed like it was meant as a compliment.

“To tell you the truth, I have been hoping to make your acquaintance for quite some time! Though we should have done this from the beginning, I would like to ask a favor of you: will you exchange a handshake with me?” He held out a hand in my direction.

What’s this? Does he really only want to shake my hand?

I wavered for a moment, unsure about the turn of events, but he squeezed my hand tightly and forcefully shook my hand. “Whoa!” I exclaimed, looking up to meet ruby-crimson eyes.

I could see Shuya over Prince Neon’s shoulders looking at us as if we had grown extra heads. *Don’t worry, you and I are in the same boat.*

“Do not be such a stranger, Piggy Duke. Though, I must ask...” He suddenly sounded intrigued. “Is this the first time you have met someone like me?”

“Well... It is the first time I’ve met someone who calls me ‘Piggy Duke’ to my face...” I admitted reluctantly, this time with a note of respect.

The prince laughed heartily once again. “I see, I see!”

This guy really is eccentric... I can’t get a read on him at all, and the spirits don’t seem to be interested in him either.

He continued. “Call me Neon. We are not too different in age. I suppose the only factor that sets us apart is our nation of origin. Let us meet again some time! If I am not mistaken, recess should be over soon! Suz, what is my next lecture? Suz? Suz!”

Calling for whoever Suz was, Prince Neon left us standing there, apparently having completely forgotten the heated argument with Shuya from just moments ago.

The prince was a free spirit—overly so, in my opinion—and I could only stand there and watch him leave while wondering who in the world Suz was.

And that was how I met Neon, the imperial prince of Dustour.

“Listen to this!” a girl gushed. “The prince asked me out on a date! Yes, *that* prince!”

“Don’t go for it! Have you forgotten how many girls he left in tears after confessing to him?! He leads people on and gives them the wrong idea, and I *hate* people like him!”

Living on Kirsch’s campus meant hearing gossip about Prince Neon at every turn, no matter how much you wanted to avoid it. Gossip about how he seduced a maid or how he hurled abuse at a professor. Even if you went the whole day without seeing hide nor hair of him, you’d still know what he did. Clearly, he had an impressive amount of attention on him for such a massive rumor mill to have sprung up around him.

“But there’s one thing about Prince Neon that’s a little... You know, he’s really touchy-feely, and he often touches our shoulders without hesitating...”

“Oh, have you heard the news? He’s even gone into the kitchens of the dining hall to talk to the chefs! Apparently, the commoners nearly fainted on the spot after learning who he is.”

Everywhere I went, I heard talk about the prince. Sometimes it was in the bathroom, sometimes I would be rudely interrupted by it in the middle of a nap while skipping class, and sometimes I would be sitting through a boring lecture. The prince had an almost inhuman ability to take initiative. Apparently, he would casually touch girls’ shoulders like it was a normal thing for him, which left a terrible impression on boys at school.

“Speaking of Prince Neon, he always has this beautiful scent... Is it some kind of perfume from the north? I’ve never encountered anything like it before, at any rate.”

“Ah, but didn’t Mister Newkern get into a fight with Prince Neon over it because he said that the prince smelled? I’m actually impressed that Mister Newkern would dare make such a comment about someone with so high a status, or anyone else, for that matter. Is there anything in this world that scares him?”

“Mister Shuya was able to confront even Lord Denning at his scariest, remember? He’s definitely got a loose screw or two in his head.”

Woow, the great protagonist shines once again! Looks like before I knew it, he’s gone and forged a connection with someone as important as Prince Neon. But, uh... Telling a prince that he smells to his face is just asking for a fight, though. Maybe you could write that off as being honest to a fault if you were feeling generous, but personally, I think harebrained suits him better.

“That idiotic prince!” some fumed. “I was saving the meat because everyone knows you save the best for last, but he just went and

snatched it away! I can't believe such a gluttonous prince exists! Does the Dustour Empire even teach proper etiquette?!"

When I went to the dining hall outside the standard meal times, I found it packed with people. The rush hour should have passed by now, so I found it a little curious until I remembered what Tina had told me. According to her, everyone had changed their eating habits to avoid bumping into Prince Neon.

I overheard a nearby student trying to reason with a friend as I passed. "...Don't do it. That high-and-mighty prince seems to find it *funny* when we show a rebellious attitude and isn't bothered by it at all. You'd be wasting your breath giving him any attention."

"I know what you mean, but what am I supposed to do about all this anger, then?!"

"Are you gonna pick a fight with the prince like Shuya did or something?"

"Ugh, no, that's too much even for me... If my mother ever heard that I argued with a prince of Dustour, she'd faint in a heartbeat..."

"Hey, y'all! Apparently that idiotic prince is going to audit our next lecture!"

"We should all ditch class! Whenever that prince is around, he always bombards us with questions before class or during the breaks! He always laughs at us, muttering about how poor our education is in the south..." The speaker sighed.

At first, apparently, a few students had tried to approach and get chummy with the prince out of pure curiosity, but that number had quickly dwindled to zero.

"Is the Dustour Empire filled with imbeciles like him?! I've heard that the headmaster is very troubled right now, and he's the one who actually chose to accept the prince as an exchange student in the first place. That means that, in all of Kirsch, the only person who stands a chance against that lunatic is Denning!"

Everyone seemed to share the same sentiment. They all said, "That's right! Denning! Denning is our last hope!"

I was creeped out by the uncanny atmosphere here, so I chose to ditch the dining hall without eating to avoid discovery. Charlotte just so happened to be helping out in the kitchens right now, so I asked her in advance to deliver dinner to my room this evening.

I kept up my guard on the way back to the dorms. I had the feeling that if any of the students at school found me now, they might come up to me crying and begging that I do something about the idiotic prince—just like Tina had done—so I stealthily made my way back.

Charlotte had arrived with *mountains* of food she'd prepared for me.

"Charlotte! I-I can't eat this much!"

"No can do! You've finally recovered, so you need to regain your energy!"

"I know you want me to regain my vitality and all, but even I have my limits! Look at all this! Even in my worst physical shape, I'd only be able to *barely* finish this meal, much less now!"

"In that case, let's fatten you up, just like you were back then!"

"What did you just—Charlotte, listen to yourself! Are you trying to make me gain weight?! Are *you* the one down with a fever this time?!"

"I am the picture of health! Come on, Master Slowe, eat up!"

"Oiiiink!" She stuffed me with spoonful after spoonful of food, leaving me unable to do anything other than make muffled noises through my chewing. "O-Oink! Oh, yum!"

What in the world is going on here? Charlotte is feeding me so many delicious dishes. I could only stomach bland foods because I wasn't doing so well but, but... This stuff is wildly delicious! By nature, I looove food with strong flavors that bite back at my health instead!

"How is it?! It's good, right?"

"O-Oink." I could only nod in agreement.

"I went through all the trouble of asking for Tina's help to arrange for fresh meat for you, so it better be good! It's even higher quality than the ingredients usually used here, so the head chef mentioned that he couldn't wait to put his skills to use! I had them prepare delicacies that even the royal palace rarely ever gets as a treat!"

Um... Tina? Why do you have connections with merchants that sell this kind of stuff?

"Oink..." I muttered weakly as I took my final bite. I felt so full that I nearly toppled out of my seat. This meal had been a battle, through and through, but I felt a sense of accomplishment in my victory.

"Charlotte, why are you doing this...?" Though it was a blissful experience, it was clear that making me eat like my stomach was a fathomless chasm was against House Denning's strict principles. I would get fat again, after all.

"Master Slowe... You said that you like me! So, please eat up!"

Huh? Wait, that doesn't answer my question. And hey, I'd...get embarrassed if she yells it out loud like that. Oh, Charlotte's all red too.

"You're charming and attractive. If you stay like this, girls will flock to you immediately without you even trying. So, please get fat. Get as round as a ball!"

Her argument was so irrational that I was stunned speechless for a moment. “Charlotte! Isn’t managing my health also a part of your job description?! Aren’t you still sending weekly reports about my diet to House Denning?!”

“That report is a trifling matter! There are so many ways I could tamper with it!”

Okay, now she’s basically saying that even House Denning doesn’t matter at all. What happened to Charlotte, seriously?

I scrambled to think of a way out of this mess. “O-Oh, right! Claude is at Kirsch right now! If I put on weight, he’s going to find out!”

“Mister Claude is fine! He used to be your knight, so he’s very lenient on you, even now! Ah, you haven’t had dessert yet, have you? I’ll go grab them right now!”

“No! You really don’t have to! I’m fine, so *please*, Charlotte!”

Charlotte had always relentlessly reminded me about the state of health and weight loss. That members of House Denning should be role models for everyone and that I should act like it, or that by maintaining an appropriate body shape, I could convince everyone that I had changed for good. Now, that very same Charlotte was instead giving me the triple combo of “Please eat a lot, please drink a lot, and please fatten up a lot.”

“I was thinking the whole time while watching you sleep,” Charlotte began slowly. “We can’t tell anyone that we actually l-like each other, right? Isn’t that why we’re meeting up in secret like this, away from prying eyes?”

“Y-Yeah,” I said with a nod.

At the end of the day, I was a member of House Denning. Nobles loved scandals. If news that a Denning was an item with their retainer got out, it would probably spread to the capital like wildfire. *But what does any of that have to do with Charlotte wanting me to become obese?*

My question was soon answered by what Charlotte had to say next.

“If you become chubby like before, nobody will ever think that we’re a c-couple!”

Starting from the day after Charlotte snapped, I quickly and painfully learned how serious she was about the nonsense she’d spouted. In the morning, there was nothing but food, food, and more food waiting for me. But this was solid proof of how much thought she put into our relationship, so in truth, I was happy about it.

“That idiotic prince looked at my girlfriend and laughed at her, saying that she put on too much makeup! Unforgivable!” some kid

yelled.

“Oi, don’t get carried away. He might not look it, but he’s an imperial prince. He’s probably not going to stick around for long anyway, so let him do as he pleases for now.”

Be it for better or for worse, that idiotic prince was the hottest, no, the *only* topic at Kirsch. The prince didn’t know the meaning of the word “restraint,” so he was bound to cause some sort of upheaval every single day. In fact, some students even seemed to be planning his assassination, of all things.

“Oink oink,” I muttered in thought.

Meanwhile, I was in such bliss that I had the peace of mind to calm people down while I tuned in to the many evils Prince Neon committed, if I had to. Some days, I would sneak in on the lectures Claude held—who seemed surprisingly well-liked by the students—or attend Professor Arle’s unique ones.

Life was good.

I was demolishing the extra large lunch box Charlotte had prepared for me when someone berated me. “Lord Denning! You’re the only one who looks so content! Are you really going to leave that prince to his own devices?!”

It was Tina, and she looked *mad*. There were quite a few girls around her, probably her friends.

“I-I guess? I mean, he’s the imperial prince of Dustour and all, oink. Uh, well, it wouldn’t do us any good if we stir up too much of a fuss, you know? Prince Neon will probably go back to his country once he’s satisfied. So it bears repeating that it wouldn’t do us any good if we act too hostile, right?”

“I think he’s only so unrestrained because we’re walking on eggshells around him! To put it bluntly, he’s looking down on us all! So everyone is waiting for you to make a stand against him, Lord Denning!”

Even if you say that... I suppressed a sigh. I’m a member of House Denning at the end of the day. In other words, I’m a noble that represents our country. With my significant status, I can’t afford to stand on the opposite side of an international student, much less an imperial prince. We only narrowly avoided going to war with them.

“Hey! How much more are you planning on eating?!” Tina exclaimed, aghast.

Ah! She confiscated it.

“You have no backbone, Lord Denning! I can’t believe you’re scared silly by that guy! I’ve had enough of you!”

I could only watch in silence as she ran off.

Was she accusing me of being spooked by Prince Neon? But...maybe, just maybe, she was right. To me, Prince Neon is an unknown variable, unlike everything I've encountered before. I have nearly no information on him. I don't know what magic he wields, what weaknesses he has, or what his personality is like. If I was up against a character featured in the anime, I would know how to deal with them. But that man is an exception.

As I reflected on what Tina had said to me, I overheard two students talking.

"I can't believe what I saw... Prince Neon's retainer—yes, *that* Prince Neon—was mumbling nonsense to herself..."

"Prince Neon's retainer... Oh, do you mean the girl who's cute but really curt?"

"Yeah, that one, I'm talking about her, and... Hey, changing the topic here, but you know how the monsters that attacked Kirsch a while ago, right? Do you know where their corpses were cremated?"

The reason I was so proactive in planning ways to improve the situation after I became the earnest Piggy Duke was because I knew the enemy like the back of my hand. But Neon isn't an anime character, and his case is completely different from all his predecessors.

...Actually, hold on a minute, I'm a little curious about what those guys are talking about. I'll just pretend I'm asleep and listen in for a bit.

"You know how there's a huge building and an open plain in a corner of the campus, right? That building's actually a crematorium, and apparently they burnt all the monsters there in one go. Then, after they turned those corpses into ashes, they scattered it all in the surrounding grass fields."

There was a pause because the other speaker replied in an appalled tone, "You sure know some gross stories, don't you?"

"Oh, come on, just hear me out. So, here's the deal. A while ago, I couldn't fall asleep late at night, so I took a walk around the campus. And then, do you know what I saw...? I saw that retainer mumbling to herself in that open field..."

"Oof... Did you hear what she said, then?"

"That's part of the problem. 'You can't, not yet.' 'Wait just a little longer.' She kept talking to thin air the whole time. And remember, this is the girl that always looks apathetic and is completely impossible to get a read on!"

"That's scary as heck! I *loathe* those kinds of supernatural horror stories! Anyway, wow, I never knew that there was a crematorium at school!"

Interesting. Veeery interesting. I cocked an eyebrow. I didn't know that either. He's right, though. There were piles upon piles of monster corpses lying about during the horde invasion, so I did assume that the staff

probably burned those somewhere. But who would have thought?

“Ah, hey, look. That guy Denning is over there.”

“Shush, he can hear us...”

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch, he can’t. It looks like he’s sleeping. But ya know, he’s such a letdown. That guy’s about the only one who could speak on even ground with Prince Neon, yet...” A sigh.

Stars twinkled and shimmered where they hung high in the night sky. The students who walked past me didn’t even take a moment to look at me, absorbed in a discussion about the gossip surrounding Prince Neon.

“Exactly. He’s such a disappointment.”

Back in my room after gorging myself on a late supper under Charlotte’s scrutinizing eyes, I had a bit of a rest to digest the massive amount of food. That’s when I thought back to the shade those guys threw my way.

“Those guys... What right did they have to call me a disappointment? I don’t even know them,” I grumbled. *But well, my popularity only went so far from the beginning, so I’m not surprised.* “Guess I’ll drink something...”

Feeling thirsty, I got up from bed. If I remembered correctly, there should’ve been a pitcher on the table inside the living room. A glass of water before bed would do me some good.

That plan went out the window when I found an unfamiliar girl sitting inside my living room, nearly knocking me off my feet in shock. Her features gave her a distant, cold feel, and her dull silver hair was cut into a short bob. A collar rested around her neck, and she was wrapped in a fur-lined leather jacket. Not only was there a girl in my living room, she was drinking directly from my water pitcher in large gulps, and I had no idea who she was or where she came from.

After Charlotte left, nobody had come in. I wasn’t a bumbling fool who wouldn’t notice if someone had *infiltrated my room* either.

My eyes widened. “You... When did you come into my room?”

However, the girl did not answer—perhaps she had no intention of answering my question at all. She only stared at me with vacant eyes as she said, “...said there’s something he’d like to ask the pig... Follow me...”

“You sure have some nerve, calling me a pig to my face during our first meeting. And you’re even ignoring my question, only planning on satisfying your own demands, huh?!”

A girl had intruded on my room in the dead of night without even introducing herself, and I’d be nuts to follow her. But for some reason, that was exactly what I was doing. In my defense, I hadn’t sensed any

ill will from her. On top of that, I had gotten a nasty shock from her abrupt visit, so any lingering drowsiness I had disappeared in an instant.

I trailed after her in silence as we walked through the darkened campus. Most of the students were probably asleep by now.

I observed her. Before me was a girl with stunning hair of a color much like Charlotte's and silky like threads of silver. Unlike Charlotte, though, she kept her hair cropped much shorter. Her eyes were a shade of a dark, indigo gemstone. She had a tranquil atmosphere to her, and was so taciturn that I'd suspect she was mute if I didn't know any better.

"Scuse me, but who *are* you?"

No matter how many times I tried to talk to her, I hit a dead wall each time. *Ya know, when someone is this set on following their policy, it's actually more entertaining than frustrating.* "Hey, where are you planning on taking me? Wait, are you going to drag me to some place where I'd never see the light of day again...?"

Pin-drop silence.

The girl turned around, stuck out her thumb, then flicked it in the direction we were going, indicating for me to hurry along.

I followed her as instructed. There wasn't anything else I could do anyway. Like what I had done earlier, I had already spoken to her many times, but she never bothered answering, no matter what I said.

The thing was, she would halt and stand still from time to time, so she moved at a snail's pace. Maybe the blooming flower beds scattered around Kirsch were interesting to her, because whenever she found some gorgeous flowers, she would sit down and just stare at them, leaving me with nothing to do but wait. Honestly, I had no idea what was going on, but I concluded that yes, I was truly having more fun as time went on.

"Over there..." she whispered.

Finally, I got to hear her voice, but that was all she said. I was in a rather peculiar situation: a girl who spoke the bare minimum guided me through the campus. By now, it was late into the night. A model youth like me should have been fast asleep a long time ago, but I was wide awake.

Why is that, you ask? Well, for one, I was somewhat certain about my theory on this doll-like girl's identity. For two, it was because I had an inkling about who exactly was waiting at the end of this little journey.

Just like I had expected, a certain someone was waiting at our destination. He was sitting majestically on the edge of a flower bed with what seemed to be a bulky brown book in one hand.

That's...probably a textbook.

"Piggy Duke!" he announced in a booming voice. "My apologies for summoning you at this hour of the night!"

His carefree greeting made all caution and displeasure evaporate, leaving only a mild exasperation in their wake. He hadn't even bothered standing up, only lifting a hand in salute, which meant that this guy definitely didn't think he was in the wrong. If the stereotype of self-centered royalty in the imagination of the average citizen had a face, it would be his.

Though his brazen greeting caught my attention, I had to ask the question that had been bothering me most. "Prince Neon, who is that girl?"

The girl who had led me here was yet again sitting motionlessly on the ground as she looked at the blossoms in the flower bed. *I mean, I have an idea and all, but it never hurts to ask.*

"By 'that girl,' do you mean Suz? She is my retainer."

"So that girl's the one in the rumors..."

"Oh? She has already become the subject of idle chatter, I see. May I ask you to elaborate, then?"

"Uh, about that... Oh, how should I explain this...?"

Saying it out loud was a rather tall order. I mean, I couldn't just blurt out that she was the girl they called a ghost who shadowed after the prince.

I looked at the girl who had hair that reminded me of Charlotte's. In terms of height, she didn't even reach Prince Neon's shoulders, and she was a quiet one. During the few times she looked at me, I couldn't see any emotion in her eyes.

"You can be candid. She is a retainer much like a doll, is she not? Suz is negligent about expressing her feelings. Even in my nation, she was referred to as a doll. I imagine there would be little difference here."

The girl looked at the prince mutely, possibly as a sign of silent protest, because the prince then barked a laugh and said, "My dear Suz! May I remind you that I was not the one who first called you a doll?"

In general, exchange students tended to put on a facade. Alicia, for example, may be feared as the Mad Dog of Kirsch now, but she'd disguised herself in sheep's clothing at first. Her "ladylike" exterior then led to her being on the receiving end of endless confessions, which was why she had begun to show her true colors. However, Prince Neon didn't seem like he was doing any of that.

"Prince Neon, were you perhaps enrolled at an institution back in the Dustour Empire as well?" I asked politely.

"Are you curious?"

I would be lying if I told him no. Even with all my knowledge, I didn't know much about the inner workings of Dustour. Though it was a superpower that reigned supreme in the northern half of the continent, historically, the southern countries had always avoided getting involved with the north.

But I didn't speak my thoughts out loud. "No, I'm not that thirsty for knowledge. Please pretend that that was a trick of the wind." I was already sick of getting dragged into trouble because I knew too much, and learning the internal affairs of the empire wouldn't do me any good.

"I see. Just as I thought, you are indeed a wise man. You chose to avoid probing into the matter."

"Prince Neon, you probably have your own reasons and circumstances, and I should respect that. This country has chosen to accept you into our borders, which means that there is no merit in me going out of my way to investigate."

The prince hummed. "Such assertiveness in your rejection makes an insipid outcome. If it were that red-haired man that I was talking to tonight, Shuya Newkern, he probably would not cease until he dragged the truth of my state of affairs out of me."

"That guy is a bit of an oddball, so don't have to take any of what he says to heart, Prince Neon." *He's the almighty anime protagonist, after all. If poking your nose into trouble was a race, he'd be a gold medal king. A mystery in your vicinity means a Shuya investigating in your vicinity, and if it's a mystery in the form of a prince of the empire, I bet he would be jumping at the opportunity.*

I cut to the chase. "Pardon me, Prince Neon, but if you do not have any business with me, may I return to my room?"

"Of course you may, Piggy Duke. You have my apologies for making you put up with the tasteless chitchat."

"There is no need for that. Being in a new environment must be rather hectic for you, but I hope that you enjoy your exchange as much as you can, Your Imperial Highness."

In truth, I wanted to follow up those words with a "Hopefully without causing inconveniences for other people, if possible," but I left that unsaid.

The sound of wind tickled my eardrums along with the chirping of bugs, which added a layer of literary elegance to the atmosphere.

The prince had only called upon me as a way to stave off boredom. Since he didn't have a purpose, I should probably get back and sleep as soon as possible, and so I moved to do just that.

Until he said *this*.

"Piggy Duke. Something wicked is attached to that clamorous

redhead.”

I halted. What he said had my attention.

I did a turn. The prince was there, unchanged from earlier, a textbook in one hand. However, his eyes bore right into my soul.

I put up a resistance by feigning ignorance. “Wh-Who are you talking about, may I ask?”

“That loud man, Shuya Newkern. A few days ago, you intervened and acted as a mediator between us. Have you already forgotten?”

“I do remember, but why are you talking about him all of a sudden...?”

“If one were to sift the history of all humanity, few are those individuals who catch the eye of wicked creatures, but they certainly exist. I have also seen many such individuals in my nation, but that redhead is a cut above the rest.”

“Prince Neon, I am afraid that I do not quite understand...”

“You do not understand? Is that truly so? Because I thought that you, of all people, would.”

This isn't good. I can't keep my cool. So Prince Neon...noticed the being slumbering inside Shuya?

“Piggy Duke, you have been wearing quite the frightening expression on your face, if you have not noticed.” He laughed, and it was just as lively as all his previous ones. “That reaction speaks for itself. It is practically telling me that I have assumed correctly!”

“Prince Neon, I have no idea why you suddenly claim that a devil has possessed the guy. But I shall give him a warning when I see him next time, nonetheless. Now that you mention it, he does have an old habit of rummaging through weird occult tools. Right, maybe that is what landed him in such a predicament.”

“Do not fret, Piggy Duke. No matter what kind of being is with him, it is no concern of mine. There is only one question I have... How did someone like *that* come to be in such a peaceful and uneventful country? That is the extent of my curiosity. In the north, there are many individuals similar to him. It might be an illness, a curse, or fatigue of the soul... The important thing is how far it goes. But then again, he lives in a world that is the picture of peace, so I cannot deny that I am intrigued about that being's origins. The main purpose of my summons this time, meanwhile, is simply because I wanted to see your reaction! Hah!”

And then, he started guffawing. Prince Neon laughed so hard that he had to clutch at his stomach, and I couldn't for the life of me understand what was so funny about all this. Even for someone like me, who had seen many bizarre things in my life, I'd never encountered this type of person before.

I can see why the students here can't stand him. That empty dining

hall makes even more sense now.

I snorted to myself as I ate breakfast in the dining hall. My thoughts were running wild, and right now, I was at peak grumpiness. I must have come here right at the time when Prince Neon was usually around, because there were no students in sight.

“Oink...” I mumbled dejectedly. *I’m not making any progress with my food... It’s all because of what happened last night.*

The Great Spirit of Fire lurks inside Shuya. The only ones who know that here in the south are me and the guild master of Zenelaus. How much does Prince Neon know...? If he’s discovered the Great Spirit, then what exactly is he planning?

“This spells trouble...” I muttered slowly.

“What spells trouble, Denning?”

I froze as a giant shadow appeared in front of my seat. “Huh?”

Then, with a loud thud, Professor Loco Moco plopped down onto the seat there. “Yer free now, right, Denning? I wanna talk.”

“Please don’t make the decision for me. I am busy enjoying my meal right now.”

The food served at Kirsch was always pure perfection. Charlotte had also given me permission to eat as much as I wanted, so I couldn’t stop my hands from shoving food into my mouth.

“Ya say that, but ya didn’t seem ta be makin’ any progress when I saw ya.”

“Was it not clear enough that I am in the middle of something right now? I was taking a moment to ponder.”

“But I heard otherwise. Ya don’t seem to be eatin’ much today, but they say that Slowe Denning’s been makin’ his retainer prep a whole load of food again and kicked off a life of only sleepin’ and eatin’ every day.”

Reluctantly, I gave in. “What is it, Professor Loco Moco? If you have business with me, I’d appreciate it if you made it quick.”

“The old coot is callin’ for ya. That’s all I know.” He shrugged.

I stared at the professor wordlessly. When something like this happened, it never boded well.

Letting out a long sigh of resignation, I asked, “Professor Loco Moco, do I have the option of saying no?”

“It’s yer choice.”

I was singled-out. I ditched my morning class and climbed the stairs with Professor Loco Moco.

This time, I didn’t turn it into a race to the top. Shuya hadn’t been summoned; only I had been. That fact made my heart sink a little.

“Excuse me... It’s me, Slowe Denning. Pardon my intrusion.”

If I'm the only one here...it means that there is definitely trouble brewing, and I bet it's bigger trouble than the last time I was here.

Chapter 2: The Hero of Kirsch Once Again

Haaah...

I let out a deep internal sigh. *Ladies and gentlemen, here we have Prince Neon leading the charge, followed by his untalkative retainer, and then the headmaster and Claude. In a sense, all of this year's key figures have assembled.*

"All right then, ya old coot. I brought him here as per yer orders, so I'mma head out now. Nah ah, nope. Can't see ya, can't hear ya, so I can't be dragged in by ya! I'm gonna be pretty busy with comin' up with my next test that'll be held inside the forest. Later!"

Professor Loco Moco then left with a poker face, the door slamming shut on his heel.

I had to stop my jaw from falling on the floor as I watched him leave, and the realization of what he'd done dawned on me. *Professor Loco Moco, how could you have the heart to do something so inhumane?* On the way here, Professor Loco Moco had made many grave statements that left me guessing. He had muttered about how he shouldn't be dragged in and had grumbled about having this menial chore shoved onto him. *But who would've thought that he'd leave me here to deal with this alone?*

Okay, I guess I could argue that because Professor Loco Moco is in charge of Practical Magic, and that because midterm exams are coming up, he's got a valid excuse. He's surprisingly nit-picky as a teacher, so he's probably busy figuring out what kind of classes he should hold and which students to group together. But how could he leave me here to fend for myself?

Prince Neon, who had been present in the headmaster's office, spat the moment he saw me. "I see how it is. So that man is a pawn you have prepared to aid your case, judging from the looks of things."

I see, that's why I didn't see him in the dining hall. He was here. Hmm, he's in a bad mood for some reason.

"Why are you looking at me?" I asked carefully. "I'm but a mere average student here."

If I'd known that Prince Neon was here, I definitely wouldn't have come with Professor Loco Moco. *It's pretty clear that only trouble would be waiting for me, after all!* I stood as still as a statue, almost as if I was an herbivore tossed into a lion's cage.

As I lingered there, Prince Neon—likely the central figure of this conversation—spoke up. “Be that as it may, Elder of Kirsch, no matter how much you try to persuade me, I will not grant you the answer you are looking for. I do not have any faith in those southerners to begin with. If you assign a southerner as a bodyguard, I won’t trust him. He’d do little more than be an eyesore for me.”

“I am not trying to persuade you, young prince. I would only like to ask a small favor of you,” the headmaster said lightly.

“No matter what you say, my mind is made up. Even if this man was the most distinguished knight in the world, I would still deem him unnecessary.”

“My, my...” The headmaster sighed.

Then all heads turned to face me at once. *Uh, hey, hold on, guys. I still have no clue what’s going on, you know.*

“Ah, please, do not mind me.” I waved my hand as I strained to maintain a polite tone. “I do not wish for an explanation at all, no, I really don’t.” *They are definitely dragging me into this. Ugh, please, please spare me. Let me go home!*

The last time the headmaster had summoned me to his office, I had been excited to come here, thinking that it was finally my time to shine by taking on a protagonist-worthy challenge, but I wanted to punch my past self into oblivion. Being summoned to the headmaster’s office was equal to being dragged into problems. Hadn’t that been made clear enough?

“Headmaster,” I said in the bluntest way possible, “I shall be direct. May I leave?” If I emphasized my reluctance, he just might let me go.

However, it wasn’t the headmaster who reacted, but the other guy. A crisp, short laugh rang out in the air. “Now *this* is what I call entertainment! This fellow truly has not been told a thing!”

He was, of course, the idiotic prince causing a sensation at Kirsch, who would strike up a conversation with anyone and everyone, disregarding his royal status. The exchange student from the Dustour Empire had plunged many of the staff and students of Kirsch into terror. Especially after that incident last night, I had planned on sticking to my original plan to stay the heck away from this guy from now on. But then this situation got forced upon me.

What in the world did they talk about before I got here? I don’t even know why Claude is here, of all people.

“Young Master... Allow me to explain.” Professor Claude, a recent celebrity among the students of Kirsch and my former knight, spoke up.

At this point, hoping to leave without getting involved was

probably wishful thinking. But it wasn't all bad news, because I was sure that ever-tactful Claude would be able to get an accurate read on my emotions. *Okay, Claude, I'm counting on you! Please keep me away from trouble!*

"Young Master," Claude began, "As I informed you yesterday, I have been acting as a bodyguard for influential people all over the world for the past few years."

"Hold on a minute! Claude, what does your past work have to do with all this...?"

Yikes. Things aren't looking good. I'm getting a baaad feeling about this...

"I will explain that in detail shortly, so please just listen to me for now."

I sulked internally. *Why does it seem like he's scolding me? How did it come to this?*

"My clients were quite varied; sometimes wealthy merchants, sometimes royalty. Among them, even villains whose infamy travels far and wide requested my services by name, but a job is a job. I obeyed my orders and protected many important public figures, to the extent that in the underworld, there are even some who refer to me as The Sentinel."

I listened to him in silence. *Occasionally, affiliates of my household have to shoulder the duty of a security guard. Generally, to make it past the selection process for these tasks, these people have to be very competent. After all, they represent the name House Denning when they're deployed on such duties. This is one of the reasons behind House Denning's extensive influence in Daryth.*

"A prince of the Dustour Empire is here at Kirsch Mage Institute, and—"

I cut in. "Enough, I have a grasp of the situation now. To sum things up, Claude, you weren't invited to this school as a teacher... Your true purpose is to protect Prince Neon. Is that right?"

"Nothing but the best from you, Young Master," Claude praised. "You grasp the importance of matters swiftly."

"So, from the sound of things earlier, you've called me here because Prince Neon claims that he doesn't need any bodyguards, huh? Thus, as Claude's former employer—" I turned to the headmaster, "—you want me to promote Claude's usefulness to Prince Neon."

The headmaster nodded. "As expected, you are very perceptive, Slowe."

"To tell the truth, personally, I really hoped that I was wrong."

Uh-oh, that was a bad move. I really shouldn't have listened to what they had to say just now. There's no going back once I'm in the know,

because needing a bodyguard means that...someone wants to take Prince Neon's life, right?

"You are joking, right?" I asked slowly. "There is no way someone wants to harm Prince Neon, surely?"

Though the reputation of the prince was the worst it could ever get, he was still the prince of the Dustour Empire, the biggest nation on the continent. And now that the situation called for his protection, things didn't bode well in the least.

"Piggy Duke, give me your support and talk some sense into these people." Prince Neon sounded annoyed. "Join me in interrogating them about where in the world they heard such nonsense about my life being under threat."

Hurriedly, I backed him up. "H-He's right, Headmaster. Prince Neon is an imperial prince of Dustour. I cannot for the life of me imagine someone at this school wanting to harm a man of such prestige."

The headmaster laid out his argument. "The imperial family of the Dustour Empire has a history of bloodshed at the hands of their kin. Prince Neon, you are the second imperial prince, and you left your country without even a single imperial guard by your side. I believe that to those who wish an unfortunate fate upon you, such an opportunity would be hard to come by."

"Interesting. Elder, it seems that you know my fatherland very well. You do make a sound argument... In all the years I have lived, I have been the target of assassination attempts so frequently that it would be ludicrous to try to count them. The imperial family of the Dustour Empire is a place where only the fittest survive. All of you might have felt that a heavy weight was lifted off your shoulders after the Great Spirit of Darkness buried the hatchet, but in exchange, the battle to become the successor to the throne would grow in intensity. You are correct, Elder. I only brought one companion with me on my current journey, and to those who wish my death, it must be a chance they have only dared to dream of."

Oh, come on now. Could you please stop right there, Prince Neon? I don't want to hear anything about such precarious feuds. Can I just tune this out? Also, I happen to know about one thing. In the anime, the war with the north dragged on and on and on without clear results. The imperial citizens are a tenacious and persistent bunch, almost impressively so.

The prince continued. "But that is where I draw the line. I mentioned this earlier, but I already have a guard. Furthermore, having that man by my side twenty-four seven is unthinkable."

Unwilling to back down, the headmaster said, "Prince Neon, Claude Mustahd is staying at this school as a professor during your

study. He will be assigned as a specialized teacher designated to you, and we can arrange for his time with you to be the bare minimum. Are you still reluctant even with such conditions?"

"I have had enough, Elder. There is another foreign exchange student at this school, just like me, is there not? As far as I know, that damsel did not have any bodyguards with her when she enrolled."

"Her Highness Alicia is in a significantly different position than you, Prince Neon."

"I see. I see now. So, you wish for that man to act as my warden at the same time."

Speaking of which, why does Prince Neon have such free rein to do whatever he wants? I mean, sure, we do have a peace treaty with the empire now, but our relations are still tense, and one of the empire's imperial princes just so happened to appear out of nowhere. I'm also pretty sure that he's here as a peace envoy, so why is he kicking up such a big fuss about a guard or two?

I sighed. He wants to persist with his self-indulgence... The empire definitely chose the best person for the job, I thought sarcastically. Would it kill him to show a pinch of understanding towards the circumstances we're stuck with? Think about it. Daryth doesn't assign any guards to a foreign prince, and despite the fact that we had information beforehand about an assassination attempt, we do nothing. That's the biggest blunder we could ever make.

Look at the headmaster. It's rare to see him at such a loss like this—just look at the pinch to his eyebrows. This prince is probably a giant pain in the backside to him.

Meanwhile, my patience was running thin because I was pretty much forced to listen to this confidential talk about the hidden truths behind Prince Neon's enrollment, so I chose to send a glare in his direction. Almost immediately, the guy made a swift counterattack and glared right back at me. *Well, hello there, Mister Terrifying.*

Prince Neon continued to press his case. "Besides, if you truly do wish to assign a guard to me, they need to be significantly competent, because otherwise, they are needless baggage. Indeed, I have come close to losing my life at the hands of assassins many times, but I have turned the tables and sent them to their deaths every single time. Suz alone is sufficient protection."

The girl beside the prince, who had erased her presence completely until this very moment, chose to speak for the first time. "Just like what Master Neon said... As long as I am here, he doesn't need any other... Because I'm strong..."

It was the girl who'd come to fetch me last night. Judging by appearance alone, she didn't seem like she was strong at all. But for the prince to make such a comment, she must've been a force to

behold.

However, if things carried on like this, the two sides of this argument would never see eye to eye. Though I was here and had the ability to give answers that might change the tides, I had been completely useless so far. *Guess there's no helping it. I suppose I'll help out just a tad.*

"Prince Neon, what repulses you so?" I asked.

"I have already made myself clear many times. I do not need a guard, much less a guard weaker than me. That would be nothing but a joke. The minimum requirement would be someone stronger than the person they ought to protect, do you not agree?"

"Prince Neon, are you saying that Claude is weak?"

"For that man to be nominated as my guard, one can naturally conclude that Daryth's might only goes so far. If this is the extent of Daryth's forces, my nation would crush you in the event of a war. It is not too late. Perhaps I should propose that to the Great Spirit of Darkness immediately."

A freezing chill settled around us. As a prince of a nation, his words were outrageously thoughtless. *This man just said something that we can't brush off.* Immediately, Claude knit his eyebrows together, while the headmaster retained his calm, patient demeanor.

But I couldn't stay calm. I had fought so hard for this peace. Even if he'd meant it as a joke, he'd said something that would render *everything* worthless. I couldn't bring myself to let it go.

"Hey, you, you idiotic prince," I hissed.

The prince didn't react, however—it was the girl who stood beside him who reacted first. "Take that back... I won't let you...make fun of Master Neon."

"Halt, Suz. He seems like he has something to say. Let him speak."

I sneered. "Shall I repeat that? I called you an *idiotic prince*."

This guy had just ridiculed the hopes and dreams of countless people. He spat on the tragic and terrifying future in the anime that I alone knew of. That was more than sufficient reason for me.

I barked out a command. "Claude, cut that retainer's hat."

Claude needed no further prompting, moving as quick as a shadow. Heeding my command, my former knight drew his sword.

She froze. "Huh?"

Why did I choose to target her and not that idiotic prince, you ask? That's because she's the one who's been looking down on Claude since I got here.

A section of the hat she was wearing fluttered to the ground where Claude had severed it.

"Young Master, I have cut it," Claude said, then went silent, as if waiting for further instruction.



Silence enveloped us in an instant. It had all happened in less than a second. Claude sheathed his sword once more.

Then Prince Neon whistled, breaking the silence. "Impressive. I find it hard to believe that he was able to respond to your command so instantaneously."

This time when I spoke, I took on a respectful tone once again. "Claude used to be my knight. I shall vouch for his abilities."

What Claude had just demonstrated was what made him stand apart from the rest: his unconditional obedience. He would never question his master's orders, and he was the most loyal knight I knew. That was why I had approved of him as my personal knight all those years ago.

"Knight Claude, it seems that you have rather formidable skills. It has been eons since I have last seen someone manage to land a single hit on Suz, much less make a cut in her hat. The most admirable part of it all, however, is the lack of doubt you displayed. Elder! It looks like your decision to call the knight's former lord, the Piggy Duke, was a brilliant move!"

Prince Neon clapped his hands as he praised the man that had raised his sword towards his own retainer. *How is he so intimidating?!* He held himself the dignity of royalty, and he didn't even show a hint of indignation over the fact that his retainer could have been killed only moments ago.

"My dear Suz, quell your anger and do not tremble so. This knight has reached a height that only masters of the sword can achieve. Making light of him, even slightly, was foolish on your part."

"Master Neon... Something is wrong with that sword... I made sure to distance myself... The sword...lengthened...?"

"Do not lose your composure over such trifling matters, Suz. My faith in you will never waver. Is that not enough for you?"

After a pause, the girl said, "Okay. But Claude... There won't be a second time."

The girl who'd stood behind the prince was holding the fallen chunk of her hat tight in her grasp, seemingly trying to control her bitterness. She hadn't shown much—or any—emotion this whole time, so I had assumed that she wasn't a very expressive girl, but it looked like I had been wrong.

"Claude Mustahd, was it? With that strike, you have certainly proved your abilities. I shall recognize that you are a warrior worthy of being my guard."

This was a change of pace from the prince's extremely obstinate stance, and the headmaster seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. I found it a little amusing. The tension loosened, and there was an amicable

atmosphere now. *Well then, my job here is probably done. Now, all that's left is to make a run for it like Professor Loco Moco did earlier.*

Seeing an opening, the headmaster said, "In that case, shall we proceed on to the next topic, Prince Neon? First, about the matter of your residence..."

However, Claude interrupted. "Headmaster, the young master is only a student, and it is inappropriate for him to hear the rest of our discussion. Would it be all right for him to take his leave?"

"Y-Yeah, exactly, Claude. It seems that I have served my duty and all, so I suppose I shall excuse myself here." *I knew I could count on you, Claude! I knew that you were an amazing guy who could read social cues!*

Not wanting to pass up on this opportunity, I prepared to take my leave, but...

"Now, now, there is no need for such haste, Elder. He already has one foot inside the door on the matter, and it would be rather cruel of us to request that he leaves midway. And I would prefer that all of you refrain from coming to conclusions on your own. I have not finished speaking yet."

Huh? Uh, no sir. That's not the case at all. I mean, I'd be lying if I said I'm not curious, but staying would only mean more unnecessary trouble falling onto my lap. I don't plan on poking my nose into those things anymore, thank you very much. Wait, look at that prince. He's smiling. Oh, this guy definitely knows what he's doing. But I can't leave the room at this point after what he has said...

"My, my." The headmaster sounded slightly puzzled. "Prince Neon, based on what you said earlier, it sounded like you gave your consent for Claude to be your guard. Is that not the case?"

"I will certainly admit that he is powerful. That does not change the fact that I already have a guard, however. Furthermore, the menaces that target me are not limited to humans, which are relatively straightforward. What I can promise you, at least, is that they will not act in any way that would inconvenience the humans of this country. After all, that would be indirectly declaring war on the Dustour Empire."

Though he was being unreasonable yet again, it was different this time. He spoke with the decorum of a ruler, which made it difficult for us to be vocal about our protest. *It's just like what I felt when I first saw him.*

"That being said, I am aware that I am here at this school as a man from a foreign land. It is evident why you would wish to keep an eye on my actions. With that in mind, I have a proposal to make."

Prince Neon then grinned like the cat that got the canary, his royal decorum vanishing as quickly as it came, and he looked at

Claude as he continued. “Knight Claude, if you agree to be my page, I just might reconsider.”

“My, that looks rather delightful! I ask that you give me a bite!”

“Huh?! Hey, wait, Lord Neon! I cannot bear to make you eat such a lowly meal!”

The prince waved his hand. “No need for that. I do not mind. Hm? Aha ha! You are a generous one! I said that one bite would satisfy me, but you gave me everything! Even if you regret it and ask me to return it later, you are not getting it back!”

Dumbfounded, I watched Prince Neon extort food as I waited for Charlotte. *Sheesh, that idiotic prince... He looks so silly now. I can't believe that he's the same person who looked so dignified when he argued against having a guard. He seems to be in a good mood ever since Claude declared that he's willing to do anything, including running errands for him.*

Still... A page, huh? People like Claude take everything seriously, so he seemed to be very grave about it, but who would have thought that Prince Neon would agree for Claude to be present as long as he was his page? I can't believe that guy. Not only that, but the first task the prince gave to Claude was to investigate what kind of person Shuya Newkern was... He's way too interested in Shuya!

And Claude, you're not completely blameless either! You don't have to be honest to a fault and comply with the prince's requests, you know? I'm pretty sure that job is his way of getting back at you.

Prince Neon's voice boomed. “Why do you run?! Surely sharing some of your confectionery would not be anything major! Suz, do you not agree?”

“I...agree... I also wanted...to eat...”

“I see. You also wished to have a taste. In that case, I suppose purchasing them would be best. I do not have any money on hand, but it will work out somehow!”

The idiotic prince's voice was so loud that I could hear it all the way over here. On the other end of the spectrum, his retainer was quiet even at her normal volume, so I could barely hear her. *Speaking of that girl, I'm willing to bet that she definitely isn't any run-of-the-mill retainer, considering how long she's been attending the prince.*

I beat a hasty retreat, and I wasn't alone. Many students scattered off in all directions so that the idiotic prince wouldn't pester them.

“Yikes, it's *him*. Let's get away before he hassles us,” a student muttered.

“Ya know? This is kinda nostalgic. Remember back when the Piggy Duke used to go on rampages?”

"I really get you there... Ah! Uh, Lord Denning! I did not expect to see you in a place like this."

"...Oink," I muttered.

"P-Please excuse my rudeneeeess!!!"

But something's bothering me. Is the idiotic prince acting? I don't know about other times, but during his display after Claude attacked his retainer earlier, the dignity and authority he had was the real deal. If what he's doing right now is all an act, why in the world would he make such a fool of himself?

"Suz, where are you going?! That is an ordinary balloon! We also have that in the empire! Come back!"

Honestly, I'm also curious about his past that he mentioned in passing. The fight for the right of succession in the Dustour Empire is fierce indeed, from what I can tell. He mentioned that many have attempted to assassinate him in the past and that his aloof retainer took them all down. Is she really that strong? No matter what I think, though, that prince seems to have genuine faith in her abilities. It feels as if they showed off the strength of their bond to me in an unusual way. It's different from me and Charlotte. They seem to have their own unique relationship.

"Master Slowe, sorry to keep you waiting! Tada! Look at this!"

What Charlotte showed me was a test paper. She had attended History of Magic, a lecture that pretty much nobody else chose.

She sounded giddy. "I got full marks! Go, me!"

The queen of Daryth had declared that she wouldn't look into the history behind Charlotte and the Great Spirit of Wind, which was reduced to little more than a pet right now. Her Majesty had said that if Charlotte willed it so, she was willing to put in all sorts of effort into giving Charlotte a noble title in Daryth, which wasn't all that impossible. However, Charlotte had declined.

Now, with a large burden taken off her shoulders, she was working hard studying and mastering the art of magic.

"Master Slowe, I'm currently doing intense training to learn a new spell! It's a spell that can put people to sleep!"

"A sleep spell? That's a difficult one. Why that?" I frowned, confused.

"You see, this thought came to me. From now on, if anyone threatens my safety, I can create an opening by just putting them to sleep so I can escape!"

"Hmm..." I wasn't very convinced. "But you have the Great Spirit of Wind, Charlotte. You'll be fine."

Charlotte looked at me with a slightly exasperated face. "Master Slowe, please search through your memories carefully."

"Huh? For what?"

“Has the Great Spirit Altanger ever been useful up until now?”

A moment of silence.

I had the urge to facepalm after hearing that. *Uh-oh. Charlotte has finally realized it as well: that the Great Spirit of Wind is seriously and utterly good for nothing. I'm not placing any expectations on that Great Spirit anymore, at least.*

“The Great Altanger has completely fallen from grace to a mere pet. There is nothing about them that reminds me of a Great Spirit. They are so different from the awe-inspiring legends we have learned in class about them, so much so that sometimes, I question whether they are actually different beings,” Charlotte said with a pout.

Charlotte's words were harsh, but it was the truth, so I couldn't come up with any rebuttal. And what unfortunate timing, because I saw the Great Spirit chasing a small mouse.

“I think you're right, Charlotte. History is a story that we have written based on our biased interpretations. That's why I really agree with and support your goal of becoming capable enough to protect yourself.”

But at the same time, I also think just a little differently. Relying on the power of the Great Spirit won't get us anywhere. It's our own abilities that will pave the path to the future we want. We are the leading actors of this world. Thus, even if the Great Spirit of Wind is playing around by chasing a mouse over there, I won't get mad.

“On to more important matters, Master Slowe.” Charlotte was all over my cheeks as she touched my face repeatedly. She looked a little pleased. “Your cheeks have started turning a little squishier than before.”

“Well, yeah. That's bound to happen with the amount of food you're making me eat.”

Charlotte chuckled. “I'll work hard so that one day, I can put all my skill into cooking and prepare even better food for you, Master Slowe!”

It was a little hard to describe what I was feeling, torn between happiness and sadness. Charlotte probably thought that if I remained thin, other girls might snatch me away, but that was impossible. After all, Charlotte was the only one for me, be it in the past, the present, or the future.

“You don't have to worry so much, Charlotte... You are my only one.”

But I couldn't finish, because an overlapping shout interrupted me. “You idiotic prince! Duel me! You mocked Alicia, so I'm challenging you to a duel!”

Charlotte blinked at me. “Master Slowe, did you say something just now?”

“Uh, weeeell...”

“Fight me!” the youth continued to yell. “What, you scared or something?!”

Nope, nope, nope, the mood is completely ruined. It's all those guys' fault for trying to start yet another stupid fight!

“Sorry, Charlotte.” My voice came out slightly strained. “There seems to be, well, a bunch of guys acting stupid again, so...”

At the source of the ruckus was a large crowd. There were so many people that I suspected that nearly half of the students at Kirsch had gathered here. They shared a common wish: to see that idiotic prince beaten to a pulp.

“Shuya, do your best! Teach that imperial prince a lesson about how Daryth nobles aren't cowards!”

“That prince mocks us every day, saying that Daryth nobles are wimps who aren't even brave enough to talk to girls! Make him eat his words!”

The exchange student from the empire had come along, carrying his impressive status with him, but he turned out to be the most problematic student of the century. Being the imperial prince of a superpower nation, nobody could lash out against him despite his actions, so everyone had pent-up anger towards the guy.

And now, we had a challenger. He was the red-haired almighty anime protagonist, who had been the topic of gossip due to his recent and rapid magical improvement.

“What a surprise... I did not expect there to be anyone willing to throw down the gauntlet to me at this school. And it had to be *you*, Shuya Newkern. Do not go easy on me, for that is unnecessary! Come at me with everything you have!”

“You might be the great imperial prince of Dustour or something, but everyone's mad at you, you know?!”

Many people nodded after Shuya yelled. Even the adults, who were supposed to dissuade everyone from fighting, and the prince himself were very keen, so I honestly couldn't say anything. In fact, the prince had apparently ordered everyone to stay out of it completely.

“Both parties, get to your positions! But Young Prince, is this really all right?” the referee asked.

“I do not mind. This is how school life is supposed to be, no? Sometimes, you brawl with others and strengthen the ties of friendship through these arguments. I read that in a book. But then again, Shuya Newkern, I think that you are too weak to be my opponent.”

“You idiotic prince! How dare you mess with me!”

The two maintained a set distance and they faced each other.

I narrowed my eyes, making sure that I wouldn't miss any moves on the prince's side. He was an unknown variable, be it his level of abilities or his spells, everything. *I'm very curious, just how strong is this guy, hm?*

"Begin!" the referee shouted.

There was the howling of wind. Nothing more.

I let out a confused breath. "Wha..."

The outcome of the battle had been decided in the blink of an eye, because Shuya had collapsed the moment it started.

"Huh?"

I wasn't the only one gobsmacked. Everyone was rendered speechless.

The prince hadn't done a thing. He hadn't even drawn his wand.

The one pinning down Shuya was that retainer of his—the girl who always accompanied the prince, the girl whose mind always seemed to be up there in the clouds.

She had closed the gap in an instant and had knocked Shuya down. That was the only explanation I could think of.

Silence.

Who could have predicted this? In my case, at least, I had assumed that the prince would win. But at the same time, I had also thought that in his match with Shuya, I'd be able to get a read on his general level of abilities. Yet, in the end, Shuya had been defeated instantly by a *third party!* *Well, Shuya's inability to do anything went according to plan, I guess.*

"Suz," the prince chided. "I distinctly remember telling you to stay put."

"He isn't worth your time at all, Master Neon... A mere bug that doesn't even know his place..."

"Now, now, do not say that. I am a prince. There is the possibility that he reserved his abilities so that he would not injure a human of prestige like me."

"Huh? Really? Hey, Red Hair..."

Suz threw that question in Shuya's direction, but unfortunately, the person she was kicking had already blacked out.

Also, Shuya, going easy? Now that's a ridiculous thought. He was going all out. That guy was planning on fighting that commanding prince fair and square, no holds barred. He also doesn't have the finesse to hold back.

"That being said, what a pitiful result. As expected, a poor display from a country of the south. Hey! Other than this redhead, is there no man willing to come at me?!"

It was as silent as a grave. Nobody replied. Even those jeering

guys from earlier got cold feet, reeling back to avoid the prince's gaze.

I let out an internal sigh. *I'm ashamed of my countrymen. But I suppose that the power difference between Shuya and Suz was just that overwhelming.*

"See? I was not wrong. All the men of the Country of Knights are cowards! Just because one person was defeated, you run with your tail between your legs." He shook his head. "Is there nobody willing to avenge this man?! Anyone?! I, Neon, will not discriminate! Even if I am against a professor at this school, I have full confidence that I can end the match in a flash! I shall promise that I will not let Suz interfere this time."

The problem student walking all over everyone issued this challenge. From this moment on, his mysterious retainer had changed into a formidable warrior in our hearts.

But I was thinking about something different. Shuya had begun gathering attention at Kirsch recently as someone with a substantial amount of skill. With his defeat, the exchange student from Dustour would underestimate my home country even further. Not to mention that Prince Neon might tell everyone back home that the students of the Country of Knight were all pathetic weaklings, and I found that possibility unbearable.

Which was why I said this: "Uh... In that case, great prince, I shall face you."

Seeing my appearance, Prince Neon blinked his eyes for a brief moment. Then, his eyes lit up immediately, accompanied by his signature laugh. "It is you, Piggy Duke!"

Probably a grand total of zero people had predicted that I would come forward to avenge Shuya's defeat. It was common knowledge among the students that Slowe Denning and Shuya Newkern were always at each other's throats. We had somewhat joined forces back in Zenelaus, but the people at school didn't know that, so I didn't blame them.

All in all, I was the one technically hailed as a hero here, being the Dragon Slayer Mister Denning. After my sudden participation, a deafening round of cheers encouraged me.

"I never thought that *you* would turn up, Piggy Duke," the prince said.

"I don't really like doing nothing when someone puts me down, you know?"

He laughed. "Just as I thought, you hold a grudge against me because I called that man a nobody."

Of course, that wasn't all to it. Just now, Shuya had come into the match with Kirsch on his shoulders. I couldn't let it end like this, with the prince having the last laugh as he looked upon us with ridicule. I

would also be peeved if someone thought that the men of the south were wimps, after all.

“Prince Neon, please promise one thing. Could you tell that valiant champion that this is a battle about manly pride?”

“Suz, you heard what he said. Do not interfere.”

There was a slight sign of displeasure after she heard those words. *But at any rate, I got a promise out of them.*

I pointed my wand at the prince.

“Prince Neon, you belittled the Country of Knights, so I shall face you with light magic.”

“Oh? It seems that this will be a little more entertaining than earlier.”

“You are quite the confident one, I see. Well then... *Homing Light Arrow.*”

The *Homing Light Arrow* I shot up into the skies whirled around in circles, then took aim at the prince, pointing straight at him. My spell hummed as it sailed through the sky, almost as if it was cleaving through the air around it.

However, Prince Neon didn’t even take out his wand. His arms remained crossed in front of his chest as he stood there like a statue.

In that case... “Hundred Rainbow Arrows.”

The single *Homing Light Arrow* split and multiplied quickly. I enchanted each individual *Rainbow Arrow*, of which there were hundreds, with all the magical elements combined. There was nowhere to hide or run—the *Hundred Rainbow Arrows* aimed towards the prince.

The audience flinched backwards while the prince whistled appreciatively. The second I unleashed these projectiles, Prince Neon would be little more than a pincushion. Despite that, all the prince did was lift his gaze once before looking back in my direction—almost as if he knew that there were *only fakes there*.

“*Shoot,*” I chanted.

The *Hundred Rainbow Arrows* rained down towards the prince, and the onlookers gulped as they watched over the proceedings with their eyes peeled. However, my spells only pierced the ground around the prince, creating numerous holes in the ground.

The prince did not run from the barrage of arrows. *It can’t be... Did he see through me and realize that it was just a warning shot?* “I thought that you would at least be somewhat surprised if I presented that many spells before you, but that does not seem to be the case.”

“Piggy Duke, I thought that you were a man with backbone, but have I placed my hopes in the wrong basket? Are you also scared of injuring me?”

“Do I look like such a softhearted person to you? *Reverse.*”

It was my turn this time. Below his feet, the magic circle etched onto the ground emitted a soft glow.

“...Master Neon! Get away from there!” the prince’s retainer shouted, but it was already too late.

I had deliberately avoided the prince when I had fired my *Hundred Rainbow Arrows* towards the ground. The arrows jabbing the land did an inversion into a magic circle.

The spell I had carved onto the ground using those *Hundred Rainbow Arrows* was an explosive spell. If the ground erupted in such close quarters, even the prince wouldn’t remain untouched.

Encircled by many watchers at the edge of their seats, Prince Neon placed his hand against the ground and let out a long exhale. “I see. You have some intriguing ideas, Piggy Duke.”

The magic circle that fenced the prince in had been completed the moment those arrows had landed on the ground. To put it simply, the prince stood atop the magic circle I had constructed.

The prince almost seemed to marvel at it. “How much mana did you even infuse into this thing?”

“You were the one who started it, Prince Neon, so you are the one who has to admit your defeat. Do you, or do you not? Please answer that right here, right now.”

“Piggy Duke. A mage of your skill would not be oblivious to the irregularities in your spell.”

I stared at him in silence. *Yeah... I did notice. Earlier, the moment Prince Neon touched my magic circle, all the magic drained from it. I’m not blind.*

“He’s being a poor loser!” someone booed.

“Denning really did it! He made the prince eat humble pie!”

But I’m the only one who noticed, which is why everyone is going crazy like that. From everyone else’s perspective, it probably looks like I defeated the prince.

“I shall retract my earlier words,” the prince announced. “I admit that I was wrong in looking down on the Country of Knights.”

Leaving only those words behind, Prince Neon left the area. The crowd of people parted for him, and that girl hurriedly followed the prince.

“Piggy Duke! That guy *always* taunts us that the men of Daryth are weaklings, did you know that?!” a guy complained.

“Just like I thought, you really are the only person who can fight toe-to-toe with that idiotic prince! Lord Denning!”

I was jostled all over the place by the crowd as I experienced a reception just as enthusiastic as the time when I had slain the dragon.

On this day, I became the hero of Kirsch once again.

After once again finding myself the local celebrity...

“Master Slowe, please come here for a second!”

...I found Charlotte waiting for me, her cheeks puffed up in displeasure. She immediately dragged me to one side of the path, and though everyone’s eyes went wide, it wasn’t unusual to see Charlotte scolding me. They probably assumed that I’d messed up yet again, somehow.

“Huh? Why are you mad at me?”

“Jeez!” Charlotte harrumphed. “Have you forgotten what I told you?!”

She leaned forward, getting closer and closer in her fervor. *Space, Charlotte, personal space!* She took my hand in her own, sharing her gentle warmth with me. Charlotte was probably going to tell me off, but I couldn’t help but feel like I was in paradise because of how close we were.

“Master Slowe, listen carefully, and remember what I say,” Charlotte whispered into my ear, sending a tingling sensation throughout my body.

“O-Okay,” I stammered.

“Not long ago, I asked you not to become even more popular than you are now! But look at *this!* Of *course* you’re going to be more well-liked by everyone if you rise up against Lord Neon!”

When I decided that I wanted to lay down the mantle of the blackhearted Piggy Duke to become the earnest Piggy Duke, Charlotte had put a lot of thought into how I could gain popularity. But now that I was loved by the masses, she was worried that some other girl might try to snatch me away. *Oh, spirits, she’s way too adorable.* I groaned inwardly. *Man, my face must look so stupid right now.*

“What are you grinning like that for?” Charlotte pouted.

“I’m not... I mean... Charlotte, that was, you know... I didn’t really have a choice. Wouldn’t you also get annoyed if Prince Neon got away scot-free for mocking Kirsch the way he did?”

“Still, you could have chosen another way to do it! With what you did, there’s a big chance that more and more girls will think that you’re attractive! All the girls in the front row were... They were all squealing about you... Remember...?”

With pink dusting her cheeks, Charlotte poked me several times in my side. It tickled so much that I could have had a heart attack on the spot. *Someone please help me. I’m in heaven.*

After I managed to collect myself again, I said, “In my opinion, it’s a nice change, though, that people consider me attractive for once.”

“It’s not nice to me! Please just stay that chubby, snorting piggy. My little chubby piggy...”

Charlotte really was dead set against me becoming any more popular, huh? *Ugh, no, stop. Control yourself, don't grin! Seeing her like this makes me feel really loved, you know? Maybe I should have purposely lost and looked pathetic for her sake.*

A girl's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Ah, Lord Denning! *Here you are! Why are you hiding?!*"

I blinked. "Tina?"

Tina arrived on the scene not a moment later with many of her friends trailing after her. *Oh. Look at her friends. Charlotte was right, these girls' eyes are practically sparkling.*

"Just as I thought, you're the only one at Kirsch that stands a chance that idiotic prince, Lord Denning!" Tina gushed.

Her friend quickly joined in. "It felt so refreshing to see you teach that idiotic prince a lesson, Lord Denning! That man caused trouble for *everyone!*"

"He even touched my shoulder the other day! Not to mention, the girls that work as maids here complained that he flirted with them during work!"

"Me too! Me too!"

These girls looked like they were in a fantastic mood because I had made Prince Neon taste bitter defeat. Problem was, their reaction made me feel like I was walking a thin tightrope.

"Seeing you make a stand against that idiotic prince, it really is no wonder that you are from the greatest noble household in Daryth, Lord Denning! I saw for myself that you are different from all the other boys!"

Because, well, Charlotte was making a silent protest behind me, her mood darkening as the glower on her face said, *I told you so.*

Prince Neon had experienced countless assassination attempts back in Dustour, but staying at the extremely peaceful Kirsch had seemingly taken the edge off him.

"Curse that idiotic prince! He touched my girlfriend's shoulder yet *again!*"

"Hey there, chill. That idiotic prince's going to be gone soon anyway. More importantly, you had a girlfriend?!"

The headmaster and his accomplices had used me as a tool to make Prince Neon accept Claude as his guard. But my job was done after that. Like Professor Loco Moco, who was buried in his work due to preparing for the exam, I also avoided Prince Neon as much as I could to prevent getting pulled into any more trouble. It was my secret to success.

"You know that new professor from House Denning? The way he teaches is so on point, it's amazing."

“Should have expected nothing less from a knight from *the* House Denning, since their livelihood is based on fighting...”

Meanwhile, Claude had blended in rather well with the community at Kirsch, it seemed. *Actually, maybe he already fits in better than I do! I constantly see him surrounded by students. I guess you could say he has good social skills, or rather that it's hard to dislike him. Though he has to set time aside to be Prince Neon's page, he seems to be fulfilling his duty as a professor.*

As for me, well...

I let out a loud burp. I had been digging into a mountain of food—my lunch—in my room. Charlotte sat across the table from me, wearing her glasses as she perused her textbook. However, the moment I stopped chewing, she would...

“Hey! Sheesh, there's still food left! Please fatten up even more, Master Slowe!”

What could I do other than indulge her and continue eating by her side? In fact, a new trend for me was being so full after my meals that I couldn't move for a while afterwards.

“Don't underestimate me! I overheard a few noble girls saying that you've become handsome lately!”

“Y-You really don't have to be so worried. You're the only one for me, Charlotte.”

“You say that, but you haven't taken me on a single date. Not even once...”

“Uh, that's, well... You know, our relationship has to be kept secret...”

“I know that, but...”

Though it sounded pompous coming from me, I was born into prestige—into one of Daryth's most influential noble families. Not to mention how I recently slew a dragon, becoming Kirsch's savior in the process. It didn't take a genius to deduce that if rumors about my romantic life got out, the gossip-loving students of Kirsch would latch onto that particularly juicy piece of meat immediately.

For the time being, however, we were safe. Only rarely did I ever share a sweet moment with Charlotte out in the open, and everyone at school was well-aware that Charlotte and I were on good terms, so nobody had figured it out yet.

“That reminds me, Charlotte... You keep saying that I'm popular and all, but what about you?”

“Why ask that all of a sudden? Ah, you've stopped eating.”

I snorted as I took a bite obediently. “I mean, you received that love letter that one time, didn't you? I made sure to commit that fact to memory.” Charlotte began to panic as I talked, and I stared at her

with accusing eyes.

After a while, she finally said, "N-Nothing happened, really!"

"Really?"

"I swear! I made my answer clear to the person who gave me the letter! I even said that if he ever has a message for me, he should..."

Charlotte swallowed. "He should pass it on through...through you! Okay, now please get back to your food!" As she stared my way, a flush made it up to Charlotte's cheeks, and she looked embarrassed.

What in the world does she mean by asking him to pass the message through me? Is that because Charlotte's my personal retainer? Or...is that because...we're a couple? I suddenly found myself embarrassed while considering the repercussions of that thought, and for some reason, I fell silent. *Charlotte seems to be busy reading her book too, so... Huh? Is her book upside down...?*

I decided to resume my lunch, munching my way through.

Charlotte and I had been spending much more time with each other after...the *thing*...happened. Just like today, I would come back to my room during my lunch break, and together we would enjoy the lunch box she prepared.

"O-Okay then, I'll head off to class."

"O-Oink! Have fun in class."

Here, Charlotte paused. "Oh! I suddenly remembered, Mister Claude recently said that there was something he wanted your advice on."

Ever since Claude had become Prince Neon's page, he had started visiting my room every now and then. Sometimes, he would come to grumble about the fact that he had to be a teacher, of all things. Other times, we would talk about the good old days.

I frowned. "Claude, after I challenged that idiotic prince last time... Was he mad?" Lately, I had been making Claude report back about the activities of Prince Neon in secret.

"The complete opposite, in fact. He seemed to be enjoying the situation from the bottom of his heart. He would never experience someone who would dare bite back at him in person back in the empire."

Well, yeah. I honestly can't believe how much guts it took Shuya to pick a fight with Dustour's prince. According to Claude, the simple act of speaking out against an imperial prince would cause you to disappear in the empire. Personally, I thought that that was way too extreme of a punishment, but then again, each country had their own ways of thinking.

"Speaking of which, the prince knows about the horde invasion at Kirsch. He expressed interest in the current whereabouts of the black

dragon.”

“They harvested all the profitable parts, sent that to the capital, then burnt the rest, right?”

“That is what I have heard, yes. I informed him that part of the monster had been cremated on site, and he laughed for no apparent reason. I do not know what went through his mind, but he looked as if I’d answered a question he had been pondering about.”

“Weird thing to take an interest in.” I shrugged. “Ah, but some time ago, someone mentioned they saw his retainer mumbling to herself near the crematorium in the dead of night.”

Claude sighed. “Truly, it seems both master and retainer are eccentric in their own ways.”

“Sounds like it.”

That being said... Huh. So news about my dragon-slaying actually reached all the way to the Dustour Empire. They’re not known for having the best intelligence networks in the world for nothing. At this point, I’m starting to feel that the countries in the south are taking our peace a little too much for granted compared to them.

“That aside, Claude, you seem to have found your calling as a professor, hm? I hear that many students talk to you directly and ask for advice.”

“I admit, I honestly did not expect the students to be so open to the ways of House Denning.”

In all of House Denning’s history, nobody had ever taken up the job as a professor before Claude. Naturally, Claude had never received the training necessary to become a teacher. From the looks of things, all kinds of struggles constantly plagued him, but he was doing his best.

Especially considering the fact that the midterm exams were coming up, I could tell why these students wanted advice from Claude. It took up a big part of our final grades at the end of the semester, and there were even practical exams that involved monsters. If I were in their shoes, I would also be very eager to ask for Claude’s guidance.

“I believe that it is because you are present, Young Master. Most of the students who selected my lecture admire you. They long to become like you. That being said, Kirsch’s students heavily lack field experience, based on my observations. And have low pain tolerance, to boot.”

“Like...me? Uh, you sure? I’ve never seen anyone like that around... Ah, I just remembered, but now that I think back on it, you’re the one who drilled the noble etiquette into Silva, right?”

Silva was a commoner before I recruited him as my knight. He had flat-out refused to have anything to do with a noble’s mannerisms,

which had been a headache for me, but he had been willing to listen to Claude. Claude had even won over Silva back when his personality used to be like a stray cat, so the students here were probably pieces of cake by comparison.

“Young Master... I see that you have not changed. You still loathe the ways of life that House Denning upholds.”

“Yeah. It’s sheer stupidity to only produce those who are only good for fighting. I, for one, would like to enjoy life more.”

Perhaps because of my way of thinking, I was actually a little delighted when I had heard that Claude had distanced himself from my family, going around the world as a guard for important people of various countries. Plus, Claude seemed to enjoy the life he had chosen for himself, so no complaints there.

I moved on to a different topic. “Hey, Claude. I’m curious... Is there really an assassin out for Prince Neon’s life?”

“An assassin?” Claude hesitated. “To be frank, I have not caught even a glimpse of one.”

I felt dizzy for a moment, and a headache came rolling in. *I mean, I had the feeling that was the case.*

“But there is one thing that is eating at me,” Claude continued, interrupting my thoughts. “Prince Neon chose to journey overseas, and to come here to the south at that, with only a single retainer... It reeks of abnormality.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I do. So much so that I am beginning to suspect that the prince wishes to take his life along with the girl who accompanied him while he is here in the south. Even if assassins do not attack during their stay at Kirsch, who can say what awaits them on their journey back to Dustour?”

For Claude to make such an extreme statement, it must be just that significant.

“More importantly, Claude, can we talk about the errand Prince Neon gave you? Keeping an eye on Shuya, was it? How’s that going?”

The moment I said that, Claude’s expression turned grim. In exchange for approving Claude’s presence in his vicinity, Prince Neon had ordered Claude to do a detailed investigation on Shuya. *What in the world does he hope to learn from that?*

“I have done a thorough investigation, from his personal history to his reputation among his friends. That includes the magical artifact in his possession. It seems that the prince was especially intrigued by the divination he used to perform.”

Divination... Hey, that’s pretty much the Great Spirit of Fire’s signature ability. I’ve been busy living the sweet life with Charlotte, but it seems that Prince Neon has learned a lot about Shuya in the meantime. I didn’t think

he would find out about the Great Spirit of Fire at the end of his investigations, but... This doesn't bode well.

"Young Master, why does Prince Neon show such a profound interest in Shuya Newkern? In my investigation, I heard that the Royal Knights also thought highly of him, but that was it. I cannot find anything particularly off about his behavior either."

"I'm just as lost as you are. Fishing out an answer from the prince directly would be... Claude, do you think you have a chance?"

"Though he has confidence in me, he does not trust me personally. Not at all. Try though I might, I cannot close the distance between us. His retainer is especially difficult to crack. She shows no emotion and I cannot get a read on her at all."

"Suz, huh?"

She was a cute girl with her head in the clouds, and it was hard to believe that she attended such a prince. But according to Claude, that girl was willing to grant any requests the prince had.

"She truly is a respectable mage. She remains constantly vigilant about the prince's surroundings, and she probably does not even have time to rest. The best comparison I can think of is a person who acts as if she is always on the battlefield, so much so that it has become second nature."

From time to time, I had sensed gazes ridden with killing intent she sent my way. Her bloodlust was rather distinctive—I would feel my neck tingle. Aiming for the neck meant that she was likely *very* serious, and it was extremely unpleasant. *Just a guess, but she's probably angry at me for ordering Claude to strike at her.*

"So, Claude. What was this request you have for me?"

He wasn't a man who would just grumble and leave it at that. Since he took the effort to summon me, he must have had a good reason.

"Shuya Newkern has applied for a long-term absence from school. The prince, apparently, has plans to secretly tail him."

"Interesting. Where's Shuya going?"

"He is heading to a dungeon hidden in the mountains not two peaks from here."

"In...teresting...?"

A storm was brewing. I could feel it.

Chapter 3: Dungeons and Arisen

“Master Neon... I’ve eliminated the monster inside the hidden chamber... The one called the Abyss Mage Olde Aumann... Monsters should stay away for a while...”

Everyone was born with an intuition. It was a sixth sense that had many uses—a friend that helped you distinguish dangerous crooks or alerted you when a menacing presence was in the area. I was also the type to rely on my instincts, but what did Prince Neon’s intuition tell him about Shuya?

“Suz, after you unpack, survey the interior of the dungeon— No, I take that back. Go outside and investigate the members of Shuya Newkern’s party.”

“Right away...”

From the information I had on hand, I knew that Prince Neon had started showing a fanatical interest in Shuya ever since the day they’d been grouped up in a certain lecture. Immediately after the lecture, he had apparently gone around asking several students and professors about what kind of person Shuya was. After Claude became his page, he’d even made my former knight investigate Shuya’s past, demanding daily reports about him.

I couldn’t help but be staggered. *Talk about extreme.*

“Piggy Duke, why the sour face? May I remind you that *you* were the one who proposed to be my companion during this dungeon expedition?”

I hesitated. “That is, well...”

Prince Neon’s eccentric behavior had also been a topic in my conversation with Claude. Claude had mentioned that the prince would walk around the entire campus, not even leaving a single corner untouched, and that he would talk to every single person he came across. Though his goals were unclear, Claude had said that in his opinion, the prince seemed to be trying to unravel a mystery by painting a complete mental picture of the entire school.

However, the prince hadn’t seemed to show interest in anyone other than Shuya. Claude had tried asking why, but all he could get out of the prince was that Shuya could possibly hinder the prince’s objectives. *It doesn’t seem like Prince Neon knows about the Great Spirit of Fire, but he’s definitely onto something about Shuya... Something of so much interest that he went ahead of Shuya to the dungeon that the guy*

planned to explore.

Collecting my thoughts, I finally managed to finish my sentence. “That is because, Prince Neon, I am appalled at how roughly you treat your workers, as well as your obsession with Shuya. I cannot believe that you sped past Shuya to arrive at this dungeon first, despite departing after he did. What is it about him that intrigues you so...?”

“Because he might turn into a possible obstacle in the way of my goals.”

“Your...goal?”

“Yes. My goal.”

It’s probably pretty clear by now, but we’re currently in a dungeon.



Humans haven’t completely deciphered what, exactly, causes dungeons to spawn. We couldn’t predict where or when or how they would come to be. All I knew was that the village we arrived at was two mountains away from Kirsch.

The dungeon’s discovery had been swift. Due to the horde invasion that had occurred at Kirsch, scouts had vigilantly surveyed the vicinity around the clock, which was how they’d discovered this fresh dungeon.

There were already nearly a dozen adventurers staying in the nearby village. They were lower-ranked adventurers, one and all, who wanted the conquest of a dungeon on their record. They were either novices or adventurers who could pull their own weight—nothing too impressive.

Adventurers would generally form teams with each other before heading to the dungeon. However, we weren’t doing that, so we skipped exchanging information in the tavern, instead heading to the dungeon immediately after our arrival at the village, with quite an amount of baggage on my back, to boot.

“It’s sooo heavy,” I whined. “Why didn’t you hire a porter, Prince Neon?”

Normally, adventurer parties would hire a porter for their expedition. They would provide the manpower necessary to carry day-to-day resources such as food and other essentials, or to bring back the rich variety of magic items one would find in a dungeon.

“Do not complain, Piggy Duke. You were the one who asked to come along.”

“What kind of training did you even do that carrying this little stuff makes you heave so...?” His retainer was in disbelief. She, meanwhile, carried loads more luggage on her back, but she wasn’t affected in the least. *She has a petite frame, but holds a tremendous*

amount of power in her body. Seriously, who is she?

In the murky darkness, the girl advanced rapidly across the rugged, rocky ground. And yet, I couldn't sense a *Nighteye* spell on her. *Is she able to see in here with the naked eye?* Almost immediately after Claude had started attending to the prince as his page, he had called that girl inhuman, and I think I was slowly seeing why.

"Does Suz pique your curiosity, Piggy Duke?" the prince asked slowly.

"I cannot help it. I mean, she looks like a normal girl, does she not? What kind of training did she do to land her such a monstrous stren—"

"There is the Guardian Knight in your country who has the blessing of a Great Spirit. She is not too dissimilar to that."

"Are you saying that she is like our Guardian Knight? My apologies, but that sounds very far-fetched."

Claude called Suz "inhuman" at every opportunity. In my opinion, Claude was quite abnormal himself, but it had clicked after I had asked for an explanation. Apparently, Suz would accomplish any odd job given to her without question, even ones that would cause Claude to throw in the towel. *To her, the prince's wild behavior is probably—actually, definitely—an everyday occurrence. I have to admit that she has admirable loyalty.*

She glanced in my direction. "What? Why are you looking at me...?"

I shook my head. "It's nothing."

After a pause, she let out an *ah*, as if a thought came to her, before saying, "If you mess up and drag Master Neon down, I'll never forgive you..."

The girl with both an apathetic mask and superhuman strength was harsh towards me, and I could feel a killing intent pricking my neck like needles. *I see. So she is the culprit behind the bloodlust I've been feeling at school lately. Just as I thought.* "Um, could you please stop that? You're making me feel on edge, you know?"

"Depends on your behavior."

I closed my mouth. What else could I do?

Prince Neon spoke next. "Suz, there is contamination in the air ahead. There is likely a monster in our planned destination. Go on ahead of us and kill the master of that chamber."

"As you wish..."

Suz moved forward into the shadows. *What an amazing speed. I'm secretly using a Nighteye spell so that I can see, but even with its help, I'm struggling to fully see through this darkness.*

"Prince Neon, is it fine to let her go alone?"

"Did the knight not tell you about what happened with Suz?"

Hesitantly, I said, “He mentioned that he suffered three devastating defeats to her during their skirmishes.”

“It is as he said. Suz is my faithful subordinate—*Neon Dustour’s* faithful subordinate. Her abilities are befitting of that title. At the very least, she is strong enough that she would never encounter any difficulties in a mere nameless dungeon such as this. We can proceed at a leisurely pace.”

From time to time, I would find Suz missing, and after each of these disappearing acts, I would hear some creature’s howl before silence took over again. It seemed that to the guard of the prince known as Thanatos, monsters of this degree were child’s play.

With such a girl leading the way, we arrived at a certain room. In one corner, there was a crystal clear spring, and seeing it, I put down my baggage with a thump. I’d packed enough water and food for a week.

Meanwhile, the prince and his retainer were talking.

“Report, Suz. What was in this room?”

“A species of monster specific to dungeons. The unique monster Olde Aumann.”

The prince hummed. “A hermit transformed into a monster, I see. I assume you have memorized this place. Now, I ask that you head towards the deepest level and grasp the layout of this structure.” He turned to me. “Piggy Duke, we shall make this our base camp. A word of warning—we are only just getting started. Be prepared to go without the light of day for a while.”

After saying that, the prince sat down on the ground with a thud.

“What are you going to do during this time, then?” I asked.

The prince casually lifted one knee into the air before closing his eyes. “Nothing.”

Other than the occasional shrieks of monsters piercing through the air, a dead silence hung oppressively over the room. And the man actually stuck with it, not saying so much as a single word until that girl came back.



Huh? You're asking what I did? Well, the ground was cool and nice against my skin, and I was more tired from carrying luggage than I thought, so I slept like a log.

And then, the *real* hell began.

Day One. Or, well, the day we entered the dungeon.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Suz giving the prince a report about the situation. From what I could gather, during my brief nap, the girl had dutifully carried out the prince's command and had explored the interior of the dungeon. In fact, she had even gone outside to gain intel on Shuya and his companions.

"Master Neon... That red-haired man has two swordsmen and one thief accompanying him..."

"How do they compare with other adventurers?"

"Terribly inexperienced... If he stays with that team... Another party will clear the dungeon first..."

"Have you gained any information on the dungeon master?"

"Your prediction was right. The dungeon core remains untouched... Though this dungeon doesn't have a dungeon master yet... Even if one does appear, the Olde Aumann that occupied this room would have probably been stronger than that. So if he tries really, really hard, even that redhead can clear it."

"I see. Just as I thought, it has no dungeon master. However, we must not let other adventurers take the dungeon core first. What I want to know is how Shuya will react when adversity strikes him in the face. Suz, let the other adventurers withdraw. Do as you see fit."

"Right away..."

I listened to Suz talk while still half-asleep. *That girl looks as if her mind is always somewhere else, but she's remarkably efficient. If I include the time when she barged into my room without permission, all signs point to Prince Neon's part-retainer part-guard being a very capable agent. Whew, having a reliable companion is wonderful. Thanks to her, I can sit back and relax.*

And then, resolutely, I proceeded to have a second nap.

Feeling that familiar killing intent prickling at my neck, I woke up. From the look of things, the girl had returned to the den at some point, and she was currently reporting back to the prince. I let out a yawn, and Suz's gaze sharpened as she sent figurative daggers of bloodlust in my direction, but it wasn't a bad stimulus for my sleep-addled mind.

Hey, wait a minute. Considering that I'm not all that hungry, I must not have slept for too long. Huh, she's making very quick work of Prince Neon's orders.

"Master Neon... I set the monsters after the adventurers that went ahead, and I chased them all out of this dungeon."

"Good job. Moving on, Suz. How many days would it take for you to clear it?"

"Half a day is plenty... Master Neon, can we really learn that redhead's true nature with this...?"

I stared blankly into the distance as I gnawed at my bread, listening to the two of them talk in the background.

"Suz, I have no interest in his ways of combat against the monsters during his dungeon expedition. What I want to know is what lies at his core—the things that define his existence. I am afraid I have to make you do something disagreeable."

Day Two. Shuya enters the dungeon, apparently.

Listening to Suz's report surprised me. Who would have guessed? That guy was acting as the party leader. I would personally stay the heck away from an adventuring party with Shuya leading the charge, but well, mages were valuable. Shortly after, I learned about the "disagreeable" job the prince had mentioned the day before.

"Suz, I want you to select exceptionally atrocious monsters from the dungeon and station them near the entrance. That will dissuade other adventurers from coming in. As for Shuya Newkern's party, throw monsters beyond their capabilities at them and observe their response."

"Understood..."

The prince was creating all kinds of trouble for other adventurers through his orders. It was absolutely foul. As an adventurer, it was one of the most morally wrong acts one could commit. When I asked him about it, though, the prince declared that since he wasn't an adventurer himself, their moral code didn't apply to him. And since I had also promised that I wouldn't meddle while I accompanied them on this expedition, I couldn't really be vocal with my protests.

During Suz's next report, she said that Shuya was struggling with a powerful monster encounter. Because he was leading the adventuring party this time, unless he gave out precise instructions, his comrades would probably lose faith in him immediately.

"Uh, 'scuse me, Prince Neon, but if you want to know about Shuya, how about I go shadow him in secret?"

"Pig... Don't steal my job..."

Oof. Wow, the killing intent on my neck is topping the charts. It's

almost as if she's trying to murder me bit by bit with her gaze alone. You snuck up on me, Miss Suz. I hadn't noticed her—she blended into the darkness to a frightening extent.

“Continue to send monsters after him, just enough to keep him barely alive, and see how he reacts. Do it in a manner that will make them regret their decision to come into the dungeon.”

That was all Prince Neon said before he lay down, probably contemplating something or other. One thing I knew for sure, though, was that Prince Neon had stayed true to his word so far: he hadn't taken a single step outside this cave. Whenever Suz came back, she would report about Shuya, then she would leave the cave once again. Rinse and repeat.

“Piggy Duke, are you able to adapt to this environment?” There was a touch of concern in his voice.

“I am fine, oink...” *I was the blackhearted Piggy Duke once, mind you. My lifestyle back then can be pretty much summed up as eat, then sleep, sleep, then eat. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that I would be a different person right now if I hadn't experienced those days. Besides, I've been trying too hard lately.* “Oiiink.” *Actually, this might be the most pleasant life I could ever ask for.*

A pause. “I see. I will be glad if that is the case.” Prince Neon's eyes remained closed, still like a statue. “Piggy Duke, if you persist with your behavior, you will not last.”

“Prince Neon, I shall throw those words right back at you, oink.”

Day Three. Shuya's driven into a corner.

Shuya's instructions to his team had been riddled with one blunder after another. As a result, one of his party had begun to doubt whether Shuya was worthy of being the leader.

I was taken aback. “Prince Neon... Is that girl some kind of demon or something?” Suz, acting on the orders of the prince, had caused all of Shuya's mistakes. Terrifying.

Prince Neon barked a laugh, amused. “If we have to compare her to a creature, a ruthless ogre would be more accurate than a manipulative demon.”

“This is not a laughing matter...”

A leader losing the trust of their comrades inside a dungeon was the stuff of nightmares. If party members deemed their useless leader a nuisance, “unfortunate accidents” weren't that uncommon. I couldn't just stay put, and I climbed up from my position on the ground. A dizzy spell came over me, and I stumbled.

“There is no need to lose your composure. I have told Suz to rescue them if necessary. The doom scenario you are thinking of will

not come to pass.”

His words didn't exactly placate me fully, but I lay down on the ground again, letting out a gloomy snort. *But, uh, he actually got the wrong idea. It's pretty embarrassing to admit it, but I actually wobbled because I laid around for too long and tripped when I tried to stand up...*

Day Four. Shuya endures.

Suz's report told me that Shuya was the youngest of his party. Adventurers, by nature, weren't all well-mannered people, unlike the students at Kirsch. If I took that into consideration, Shuya sounded like he was doing a good job as a leader.

“Hmm, I've gotten a little unfit,” I muttered to myself. “Maybe I should go on a short walk.”

“You plan to save that boy. Am I wrong, Piggy Duke?”

I wanted to kill time by walking around the dungeon and exterminating some monsters, but I was met with a refusal. When asked for an explanation, Prince Neon said that if the mage known as Slowe Denning was thrown into this dungeon as a new variable, he would find it difficult to remain in total control of everything. *Huh. Did Prince Neon even predict that I would go on a rampage as stress-relief?*

“If you have too much time on your hands, I would like you to tell me your impression of Shuya Newkern.”

In an effort to wilt all of Prince Neon's interest in Shuya, I told him all about how much of a nuisance that guy was, and that he was practically a walking, talking magnet for trouble.

Day Five. Shuya overcomes his crisis.

The adventurer group had changed drastically. Apparently, Shuya had put his life on the line to protect his comrades from a powerful monster that, naturally, had attacked them because of Suz.

But that hadn't been all. When Shuya and the others had been taking a short break, something *else* had appeared—something Suz hadn't provoked into attacking them.

Prince Neon tilted his head. “Interesting. So an arisen appeared.”

“One of the members fell under the influence of the arisen... And they all panicked. A few even suggested that they retreat from the dungeon. It was a critical situation. That guy saved the day...”

“The *Purifyre*, huh? He has learned quite the troublesome spell.”

Arisen detested the fire spell *Purifyre* spell because of its purifying properties. It wasn't much different from *Heal*, but it was more suitable for cleansing the influence of the darkness. The prince frowned as he contemplated the implications of Shuya gaining

Purifyre, but I was oddly calm. *I mean, that's how Shuya is. He's definitely the kind of guy who'd awaken some new kind of magic when backed into a corner to save his friends and break out of whatever predicament he landed himself in.*

"Piggy Duke, it seems that Shuya is absurdly compassionate to his comrades. He gained the *Purifyre* spell solely to save them. He is quite a...soft person."

Once again, Suz disappeared to torment Shuya and his company. As he did without fail whenever she left, Prince Neon leaned against the stone wall and shut his eyes. According to him, he was meditating, but he totally seemed to me like he was sleeping.

Prince Neon had told me beforehand to bring along something to kill time with, so I had carried my copy of *A Complete Guide to Monsters*, but my patience had run out. *It's so dark that I can't see anything, ya know!*

"Prince Neon, if you planned on letting Suz observe Shuya in your stead, was there really any need for us to enter the dungeon as well?"

"How else could I react in time in the unlikely event that something happens to Suz?"

"I believe that monsters in such an inferior dungeon could never hold a candle to her."

At this point, it had already been crystal clear to me that Suz was one of the most outstanding retainers one could ask for.

"She is *my* guard. I would be rather troubled if she struggled against monsters like these."

"No wonder you said that Claude was unnecessary. You compared her to our Guardian Knight, who has received the personal blessing of Lord Lectrikuhl, and...I think I see what you mean."

"Indeed. Enhancing her physique is Suz's specialty."

...I would have believed him if I couldn't see what I can see. He's lying. I can see spirits where normal people can't, and I can tell that the light spirits aren't helping Suz.

But I didn't plan on forcing the answer out of the prince. Everyone had their own secrets. Furthermore, even if she wasn't a mage, any number of magic items could grant her the ability to perform magic.

"Prince Neon..." I asked hesitantly. "I know it is a little late for this question, but why are you so curious about Shuya?"

"There's something more than just the boy inside of him. Am I wrong?"

Utter silence.

"Hah. See? I am not the only one refusing to give answers. Just assume that I am talking to myself. You see, I am concerned about his welfare."

Day Six. Shuya's expedition is going well. Suddenly, I feel I'm nearing my limit.

Suz's report had little more than the same old, same old. "Master Neon... The redhead stumbled at the start, but... Everything went smoothly afterwards..."

"Continue your surveillance. Do not fail to report if he does anything that diverges from my prediction."

"Loud and clear..."

I would've expected anyone to at least make one complaint about the lifestyle here after this long, but Prince Neon was remarkably relaxed. This place was dark—there literally wasn't even a hint of light. *What kind of life has this man led until now, seriously? Even I'm starting to go crazy...*

Something moved. "That's..." I rubbed my eyes. *Did I see wrong? No, I didn't.*

My eyes weren't playing tricks on me. A white, fuzzy...*something*...squirmed in one corner of the darkness. We were inside a dungeon, so I'd assumed that I might come across one, but...

"Stay still," the prince commanded. "It is just a few arisen. I predicted that it was going to come our way as well any time now, but it took longer than my initial estimate."

It was something present everywhere and anywhere, invisible to the naked eye—the remnants of the dead, a cluster of pure energy. Some living creatures died with resentment or deep regret, manifesting into physical remnants such as these things. It moved autonomously, seeking out the body of a human or some other animal to take control of. It was the first time I'd ever seen one in person.

"...Prince Neon, can we relocate?"

"Hm? Shocking. Are you scared of the arisen, Piggy Duke?"

"I-It's... It's not like I'm scared or anything. I just think that dungeons with arisen are rather off-putting."

Oh, yeah. Didn't Professor Arle say that she was possessed by one and spent ages forcefully confined inside the world of her dreams? I'd be lying if I said that didn't scare me. These creatures don't have a will of their own—they're embodiments of lingering obsessions. If you touch them for long enough, they'll mess with your consciousness.

I shuddered. An arisen passed through my body, sending my blood running cold with a chilling sensation. It was strange, almost as if it was draining my very life force. I didn't want to stay here.

"Arisen are commonplace in dungeons. That being said, it is a rare sight in a newly spawned one. Do not fret. As long as you retain your strength of spirit, arisen are harmless. They are nothing more than

tenacious, lingering attachments lusting after our bodies.”

“I know that in theory, but...”

As the days went by, the only thing Prince Neon did was listen to Suz’s reports, even as they multiplied one after the other.

I was quickly nearing my limit, and I couldn’t keep up my lifestyle of only eating and sleeping the day away. I proactively talked to Prince Neon, a method I used to deal with my loneliness. To get away from my fear. To distract myself from the arisen, even if it didn’t last long.

Day Seven. Shuya and everything to do with him vanishes from my mind.

I had given up on driving away the arisen, and a begrudging acceptance grew on me. Instead, I chose to talk about a variety of things with Prince Neon. Even I didn’t really know what caused this change of heart, but the fact of the matter was, we exchanged idle chatter inside the darkness.

We talked about things from life at Kirsch to the ideals of House Denning, or even Daryth as a country. Sometimes, I brought up the rumors in the south about the faraway Dustour Empire, as well as the picture they painted. I rambled, and Prince Neon listened.

“Piggy Duke, are you on good terms with that retainer of yours?”

“I’ve been with her for a long time, and perhaps because of that, being together feels like how we are supposed to be.”

“I see. My relationship with Suz is similar to yours. Though Suz is my guard, mainly.”

Neon Prince had been especially interested in Charlotte. Talking about her made a pang of loneliness pierce my heart. *Why in the world am I camping in a dungeon of all places?*

The more Prince Neon asked about Charlotte, the more my heart swelled with emotion as I thought about the girl I hadn’t seen in a while.

I miss Charlotte...

Day Eight. My perception of time has long since gone haywire.

My limit snuck up on me surprisingly quickly.

“It doesn’t make sense to me! Why, *why* does Shuya spur you on so much?! Have you not done enough already?!”

My mind was already so numb that I had begun to think, *Is this hell?*

The retainer had been reporting about Shuya breaking through

the middle layer when the last straw had broken the camel's back.

"Prince Neon, you won't tell me why you are obsessed with Shuya! I don't even know why you came to Kirsch! You came to make friends?! What kind of fool would believe *that*?!" I screamed.

"Calm down. You are having a panic attack. It is likely caused by an unbalanced diet. You refuse to eat medicinal herbs, after all, claiming that they taste horrid."

"Please don't change the subject. I'm only asking you what the point of doing all this is! Day in and day out, we are stuck in this darned damp darkness while arisen creep around us!"

According to the girl's report, Shuya should've been able to clear the dungeon in a few days. Shuya's team was doing a fantastic job of overcoming all the harassment Suz dished out under the prince's orders, and their teamwork was getting better and better. Based on Suz's reports, Shuya had already changed a lot since his expedition began.

"Piggy Duke, I am indebted to you and your knight, but that is the one answer I cannot offer. Do not make me repeat myself."

But I had a bone to pick with him. "I have no plans of going along any further with your whims, Your Highness. Tell me the reason it has to be Shuya."

"Do you have a dream?"

"Scuse me?"

"Let us say that you had a dream and came to a place where you are this close to reaching it. It truly is nearly within your grasp. During such a time, no matter what kind of bitter trials rain upon you, all of them would likely taste sweet."

What the heck kind of nonsense is this? How does that have anything to do with what's going on?

The prince held his wand. He only had one thing to say to me. "Piggy Duke, I suggest that you sleep a while."



I had a mysterious dream.

The arisen must've caused it. Being shapeless memories of the dead with no identity of their own, sometimes, they would impart memories from one person to another.

My vision twisted and turned. Slowly, as my eyes adjusted, I could make out a cramped, run-down hut. Outside the windows, far into the distance, was a small castle. Inside the hut, meanwhile, were stacked straw bales.

"Come out, whoever you are. This is my hideout."

I said it with a dignified tone, directed towards the child hiding in

the bales of hay, a small head poking out the only indication that someone was there.

“...Are you going to die like this?”

However, my voice was calm—*too* calm, for a person looking upon a child who was on the brink of death.

The child was small and dirty all over, their body motionless where it lay within the straw. Even though I talked directly to them, I got no reaction. I couldn’t even tell what gender the child was.

“So, you are just like me. A victim of betrayal, are you?”

I didn’t know why I said that. What I could gather was that I hinted at something akin to despair towards humans.

The collapsed child lay still. In the ensuing silence, their stomach rumbled out in hunger.

“Oh. So you were hungry, I see. You should have told me earlier.”

I brought the bread in my hand closer to the child’s lips. This meant that I would go without supper tonight, but right now, my curiosity far eclipsed my hunger.

“I shall give you this, then. You are a monster, so poison isn’t a concern to you, is it?”



My head felt clouded. The only thing left was the remnants of that mysterious dream.

“Piggy Duke. You are awake.”

“Your Highness, what did I...”

“It is an arisen’s dream. Not too bad, right? A significant number of people would feel as if they were restored to full health after having one of those. Especially people like you right now, in your state of extreme stress.”

Desperately, I scrambled through my memories. *Ah, that’s right. I couldn’t stand this environment anymore, and I told the prince that we should go back. Then arisen appeared, and...* “So that was an arisen’s dream... I see, it is no wonder that countless people are so desperate to seek them out.”

The fatigue that I had felt before having that dream was completely gone. It made sense that people would use it as a means of escapism. I had heard stories about it before—arisen lured living victims into a labyrinth of their own memories, enticing them with pleasant dreams while they slowly took over their bodies.

However, those arisen—which had been the bane of my existence—were nowhere in sight. “Prince Neon, where are those arisen?”

“Those? Suz dispelled them with light magic. They are probably drifting around somewhere again.”

“Huh. It is pretty rare for arisen to go elsewhere after finding

vulnerable humans like us, especially us mages. Ah, anyway, what happened to Shuya, if may I ask? I remember your retainer said she was heading off to harass him one last time.”

“It is not ‘harassment,’ as you call it. Those trials are also for Shuya Newkern’s benefit.” Prince Neon stood up majestically, as if he hadn’t sat through nearly his entire stay here. “Quell your unnecessary worries. Evidently, that boy will not get in my way. He is quite a softhearted man, is he not?”

“...Huh?”

The prince smirked meaningfully. “Though it is much earlier than I expected, let us make our way back now.”

The prince had declared that we would return on foot, and I had a *baaad* feeling when I’d heard that. On our way to the dungeon, we’d needed to arrive sooner than Shuya, so we’d spent a fortune on hiring a carriage. Who would’ve thought that we would *walk* back?!

“Prince Neon! We are surrounded by a big pack,” I yelled.

We were now trekking through the woods that spanned the mountain on our way back to Kirsch. Step by step, we marched through the foliage as if we owned the place. It’d been a long time since I had last been outside. The fresh air did wonders for my mood.

That being said, I was *definitely* right in wanting to get back to Kirsch quickly. And for some reason, many wild dogs were hot on our heels right now, which meant I was doubly right.

“Suz, this has gone on for too long. Disperse them in one fell swoop.”

A lone girl stood in their way. Perhaps deeming her better prey than the prince and I, the wolves all targeted her instead.

“You all can’t even tell the difference between us... You’re so pitiful...”

Suz stayed behind, preparing to deal with the wild dogs as we continued on ahead down the mountain.

“Hm? Piggy Duke, are you not worried about Suz?”

“I am painfully aware of her abilities. She must be a very capable warrior, considering how much harassment she was able to perform on those adventurers in the dungeon. But... Your Highness, was it all right to leave Shuya like that?”

“What a surprise. You were very vocal about leaving that dungeon, but now you are spouting nonsense about going back.”

“That’s not what I said. Truth be told, I never want to go back there. It is just that I was convinced you were going to remain in that dungeon until Shuya cleared it.”

“I could tell from the boy’s actions inside the dungeon that he cherishes his comrades, and takes his softheartedness too far. I know

enough.”

Anyhow, something about Shuya’s actions must’ve struck a chord with the prince. Prince Neon seemed like he wasn’t planning on doing more uninvited investigation into Shuya, so personally, I was thankful. It felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders.

“My Prince, I admit, I did not think that you were serious about getting back to the campus on foot.”

“Healthy, is it not?”

“*Too* healthy, thank you very much! Do you even have any idea how many days this is going to take?”

The prince, however, was not the one who replied. “Master Neon’s words are absolute.”

Before I’d realized it, Suz had finished dealing with the wild dogs, and had returned to join us. She was as ghostly as always, and I couldn’t help but jump every single time she spoke.

A fairly lengthy time had passed since I had started keeping the prince company on his willful endeavor, and I learned one thing: this man was an idiot. A big, *big* idiot.

I had also made my share of reckless decisions, like my journey across Huzak and back in Zenelaus, but the prince was on a whole other level. He could find joy in meaningless hardships.

“You look spent, Piggy Duke.”

Time was going by in a flash, and night had snuck up on me. We’d made camp in a clearing with the vast skies yawning through the canopy overhead, but it was freezing. We’d set some wood on fire with magic, and were in the process of warming up.

“Well, that is to be expected... I remained stationary the entire time inside the dungeon... I *am* glad to be outside again, but my legs can’t keep up.”

“You endured longer than I thought. Take pride in that. Two days in such an environment is already enough to make an ordinary person break down.”

“Thank you for the compliment, but I cannot take pride in that at all.” *I swear, I will never enter a dungeon with Prince Neon—no, this weirdo—again. Never.*

I could hear monsters howling somewhere in the distance, but just like what the prince had said earlier, they didn’t seem to approach us. Suz was probably doing what she’d done to the adventurers—frighten the monsters in this land using some unsavory method or other.

“Piggy Duke, you seem to be a prominent mage, but even you would feel fear towards the likes of arisen if you were thrown into that environment. Dungeons are places which drag out the true nature of humans—See? I was not too far off, was I?”

“...It was an invaluable experience.”

“People only lay their truth bare in extreme circumstances. That is the exact reason I tormented Shuya Newkern so extensively. Be sure to keep it a secret from him, will you?”

“I could never tell him that we acted as his stalkers, even upon threat of death.”

“Good. That aside, even with your character, you had moments when you could relax in that excruciating environment. You do not seem to be aware of it, but it was evident to me. So, I have a question for you. Are you in a romantic relationship with that retainer of yours? You were calling her name deliriously when you were in thrall to those arisen.”

“...Huh?”

At first, his words sounded like nonsense to me. But then I saw Prince Neon grinning like the cat that got the canary, and I had the shocking revelation that I had done something absolutely humiliating. *I repeatedly muttered Charlotte's name to myself?* My cheeks flamed scarlet.

The prince laughed. “Hm? Why the redness, Piggy Duke?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What!” I sputtered. “Your Highness, what are you—”

“Do not deny it, and do not pretend. Despite being stretched nearly to the point of breaking, you would wear a peaceful expression whenever you talked about her. Though I am quite ignorant about the matters of love, even *I* could tell. So? Which is it? Are you two an item?”

“P-Please wait a minute, Prince Neon!”

An item? Who is? Me and...Charlotte? The moment that realization dawned upon me, my face almost spontaneously combusted. *Y-Yeah. We are dating. Charlotte and I have only just confessed to each other and learned of our mutual feelings. But I can't tell anyone, because...I'm Slowe Denning.*

I tried to form words with my fumbling tongue. “I-It's, we're not, I mean—”

“Right now, I am asking you as a fellow human being, not as someone weighed down by our stations. We lived in that dark cave together, and are tied by that bond. Spare me the secrecy.”

Suz had been nibbling at some animal's meat that she had hunted somewhere, keeping up an air of nonchalance, but even she drew nearer during this topic. “I also want to know... Which is it, Slowe?”

“Ha, ha! Look, you are outnumbered.”

“...Tell us, please?”

I hadn't expected Suz to latch onto this topic. Back in the dungeon, she'd only gotten to see my pathetic side, so she'd viewed me with judgmental eyes. Her interest in me had been a big, fat zero.

Now, she was leaning in, curious about my relationship with Charlotte.

“You and that girl...are always together, just like the prince and me. Yet, you could end up together...? Hey, tell me...”

“Heh. Resign to your fate, Piggy Duke.”

“Hey. Why aren’t you talking?”

Woow. She’s not just curious, but also awfully talkative! Not only that—she seemed so apathetic from what I’ve seen of her at Kirsch, but now she’s dying of interest. Her eyes are practically sparkling. I never imagined she had this side to her. I’ve never cared about her age, but looking at her now, I think she might be younger than me.

“Hey, tell me...” Suz insisted.

If Prince Neon had been a permanent student of Kirsch, I definitely wouldn’t have answered him. But, well, the sky was beautiful today, and there was still a long way ahead of us. Judging by Suz’s reaction, she’d probably constantly pester me to give her an answer until I caved. Prince Neon would hound me for the rest of his stay too, and I didn’t think I could evade him completely.

Which was why I gave in, raising my hands in surrender. “What? Do you have a problem with it or something? Who cares what relationship we have? Yes, you are right, we like each other. Happy now? So what? Leave me alone.”

Prince Neon laughed heartily. “Hah! Suz, this guy admitted it without a struggle!”

“...Who first? Hey, who was first?”

Prince Neon must have passed his pushiness on to her, because Suz would *not* let me go. And well, as you can see, I buckled quickly under their pressure.

“The one who confessed first was, well... It was Charlotte, but...”

Prince Neon’s badgering led to an all-out interrogation session where they tried to fish every last detail out of me. It was, of course, about my relationship with Charlotte. As the person once feared as the blackhearted Piggy Duke, these days were too heart-racing and honey-sweet for me to even bring up a word of it, to be honest.

If I had to pick, Suz was the one more eager to dig into the sugar.

“Huh? Don’t the guys normally confess first...?”

“The word ‘normal’ will never apply to my relationship with Charlotte...”

“Go on.”

As I talked, I also felt like my mood was soaring somehow. I must’ve unloaded an entire sermon about my secret feelings for her. It was no use crying over spilled milk, so I might as well spill it all the way, right?

I continued barraging Prince Neon with my lovey-dovey moments with Charlotte until he said that he had more than enough. Halfway through, Prince Neon had already looked like he was tired of listening, but Suz had seemed like she could have listened to my tales forever. And this conversation carried on and on, accompanying us all the way back to Kirsch.



After several days of ceaseless walking in the forest, we finally made it back to Kirsch. We had already informed the school in advance that we might be absent for quite a while, so there hadn't been a fuss over the prince's disappearance. Actually, everyone might've savored a moment of peace *because* he hadn't been around.

Charlotte, however, had been the lone exception. She'd been lost for words the moment she'd spotted me. "Master Slowe! What in the world happened?!"

"Huh? Charlotte, uh... Do I look that shocking? I made sure to bathe constantly, though."

"That's not it! You look like you've become somewhat slender! You *finally* managed to fatten up after eating piles of food, but it's gone!"

This was how Charlotte greeted me. I'd been away from school for a significant amount of time, so I'd assumed that she'd be worried sick, but it turned out that she was in shock over me trimming down again. Seeing her grieving, reality finally seemed to settle in. I was back. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I'd been apart from Charlotte for so long in recent days.

To one side, Suz stared intently at our interaction for a long time.

The next day, I had an upset stomach. Maybe I shouldn't have scavenged for food off the ground in the forest. *That's so weird. Prince Neon and Suz ate plants that looked a lot nastier than the stuff I had, so why am I the only one suffering?* I had to endure a long scolding from Charlotte about eating dubious food while she nursed me back to health.

"I know it might've been possible in the past, but you've changed, Master Slowe. So why would you eat wild mushrooms...? Where did you even go?"

"Uh... Prince Neon told me to keep it secret."

"I can't believe you still haven't gotten better... It must have been something really nasty."

I sighed. "Oh, why did this have to happen to me and me alone? Prince Neon and Suz ate the same thing!"

"There's no way that a noble person like Lord Neon would

scavenge for food! And. More importantly. When did you start calling his retainer's name so casually? How did you become so...friendly with each other?"

"That's, well, you know. A lot of stuff happened and all."

Experiencing a stalker's life with Prince Neon in the dungeon was probably an experience I'd never forget. It had been such a hellish journey that I'd nearly lost sight of myself.

"Speaking of whom, Miss Suz was the one who gave me the medicine you just took."

"Oh? Huh, looks like she does have some redeeming traits after all."

If someone had told me that before I went into the dungeon, I would've laughed in their face. *To think that she would deliver medicine to me!*

"Master Slowe, is something wrong?"

"Nope! I'm just happy."

As for the reason I was able to become closer to her, I was willing to bet that our trip back from the dungeon explained it. When I'd talked about the sweet moments I'd shared with Charlotte on the sly, she'd been delighted, acting like a normal girl her age—a delicate flower bud on the cusp of blooming.

Suz had happily listened to all my bragging about Charlotte, despite the fact that even Prince Neon couldn't take any more of it. I hadn't been the only one surprised, though, because Prince Neon had commented that he'd never seen Suz like that before either. *Ahem. Anyway, I told those two that all of my words were top secret and emphasized that they forget about it once we get back here.*

"Ah. Actually, I ran into her. When I went to help out in the dining hall a while back, Miss Suz came by herself to have a meal, and when she saw me, she encouraged me to do my best. She also said that she was cheering me on... What did she mean?"

"Uh, um, no clue! Oh, but I mentioned to her that you awakened your magic and have been working hard at it lately. So I bet that's what she's talking about."

That was close! Jeez, I swore Suz to secrecy about my love life, but she went ahead and tested the boundaries! If Charlotte wasn't so dense, she would have deduced that I blurted our relationship to someone else! Looks like I have to hammer the message home again sometime.

A change of topic was in order. "Anyway, Charlotte, did anything change at Kirsch while I wasn't around?"

"The only one that fits the bill is Lord Neon! He changed way too much!"

In the eyes of people like Charlotte—who had stayed at Kirsch the entire time—post-dungeon Prince Neon, apparently, seemed to be

rather different. It was almost as if he had transformed into a stranger.

“Everyone is surprised at Lord Neon!” Charlotte exclaimed. “He suddenly turned very quiet, which isn’t what he used to be!”

Ever since the prince had arrived at Kirsch, he had spent his days pestering practically everyone he could find. But now—at least according to Charlotte—he had suddenly calmed down.

Charlotte continued, “You two made an abrupt disappearance at the same time, so everyone is gossiping that you did something to him.”

Sorry, but you’ve got the wrong guy here. Technically Shuya was Prince Neon’s victim, though I was the one who suffered the consequences of his obsession. But anyway...hmm. So Prince Neon has completely changed, acting like how a courteous prince should... My mind churned, trying to piece together what had happened, but was met with failure. Okay, no more. An ordinary guy like me could never understand what that prince wants to do.

“Anything else, anything else... Oh, if we’re talking about things related to you, remember Professor Arle? You take her lecture. I heard that she was sick... Hm... Ah! Oh, I remember now!” Charlotte suddenly clasped my hand as she said, “Mister Shuya!”

I felt her gentle warmth directly against my skin, and my head felt both hot and dizzy. *Oh, I’m sooo glad that I’m sick in bed right now. Charlotte’s probably going to assume my shy reaction comes from my fever instead.*

“Right now, the school is going crazy over how Mister Shuya cleared a dungeon!”

Two days after we had come back to Kirsch, Shuya had returned as well. He had already been a small celebrity at school as the brave student who went up against that idiotic prince, and after a sudden disappearance, he had returned with a recent dungeon clearing on his adventurer record. *I think you know what happened next.* When I had recovered enough to leave my room, I saw him surrounded by a crowd, and was pretty surprised at the sight.

I could hear the students making a fuss.

“Shuya! Is it true that you defeated a dungeon master?! Not bad at all, bro!”

“Zat is amazing!”

Hm? Hey, look who’s here. Li’l Lorraine is there too. If she’s there, it must mean that Shuya’s reputation at school improved as well.

“What are you acting all smug for, hm, Shuya? Since you took down a dungeon, you must’ve earned a fortune, right?! Come on! Have you forgotten how much you owe me, huh? Cough it up right now!” Alicia blabbered in one breath.

“Yikes, it’s *you*?! I was trying to avoid you!”

“*Excuuuse* me?! What’s with that?! Come on, tell me how much you earned!”



The Adventurers' Guild handed out rewards to adventurers who cleared dungeons. If my memory served me right, Shuya's team, including him, had been a party of five. He should have received plenty even after splitting the sum equally.

I could hear Alicia shouting again. "Haaah?! That doesn't make sense! Aren't adventurers supposed to be filthy rich?! You're wasting my time, so I'll go to your room! Hmph, I bet you're being stingy because you don't want to pay me back!"

Being part of the peanut gallery watching their married-couple antics sounded like a great idea, but I had only just recovered. The short stroll I had done was already enough, so I decided to hurry back to my room.

Okay, guess I'll sleep the day away self-indulgently again, just like back in my blackhearted Piggy Duke days.

But I didn't get to carry out my plans, because an unexpected guest paid me a visit. *This guy has terrible timing—I'm in the middle of getting changed into my pajamas, you know!*

"So? What business do you have with me? The Great Dungeon Exterminator, hmm? Must be nice having so many cute girls fawning over you."

"Y'know, when you're the one saying it, it sounds very sarcastic."

"Get to the point. You said you wanted to talk to me?"

It was Shuya. As far as I could remember, Shuya had *never* come to my room before. *I mean, I do think our relationship has improved somewhat compared to my dark ages, when we butted heads whenever we came across each other, but still.*

"Uhhh... Well, Denning, there's something I want to ask you, and..."

And he even acted sort of respectfully rather than just making demands! *Ugh, he's grossing me the heck out. What is he scheming?* "Hurry it up, will you? I don't have all the time in the world, you know. I haven't gotten to eat my lunch."

"Hey, I'm a bit curious actually. Are you going to eat all the food over there? No way, right?"

"That is my remaining lunch. I need to finish it all, or else Charlotte's going to get mad at me, and—" I snapped out of it. "Wait a minute. I don't owe *you* an explanation."

A whole course of dishes took up one part of my room, emitting an overbearing presence. Charlotte had been cranky for a while because I had only left her a note when I'd made my departure. Not only that, but my features had sharpened a little during my journey, and that had been out of the question in her book. I signed internally.

Oh, my retainer is such a cute little nuisance sometimes. But if I polished off everything, Charlotte would be elated. I always tackled these binge-eating sessions with all my heart, just to see her brilliant smile.

“Oh wow. Sounds like you’ve got it hard, Denning.”

“Not as much as you, considering that swollen face.”

Alicia must have given him a good slap. His red, swollen cheek was pitiful. *I can totally picture what happened. She smacked him with a “Don’t mess with me!” because he can’t pay his debt.*

Shuya hesitated, seemingly struggling with what to say next.

“Denning, if I’m not wrong, you took Herbal Medicine as an elective last year, right?”

I raised an eyebrow. “So? Ah, wait, don’t tell me—the test is drawing near, so you want information about the questions from last year’s test. No way, right? That’s the same thing as cheating, you know.”

Shuya let out an affronted cry. “Uh, no, it’s not that! And for your information, I can easily get an average mark even without asking you that, thank you very much!”

Wow. Shameless, much? I know all about how you go crying to Alicia whenever tests come up, for your information.

“Then what? Ah. Is it about the rumor that Professor Loco Moco is scouting out for monsters inside the forest? Sorry, can’t help you there. The only thing I know is that he’s pretty stumped because he hasn’t come across any.”

“Huh. I didn’t think you’d be so diligent about gathering test intel...”

“Well, unlike a certain *someone*, I don’t want to get the lowest mark because I went into the test completely blind.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me...”

Last year, Professor Loco Moco had announced the contents of the test for Practical Magic in advance. But Shuya had been stubborn, saying that he would rake in his marks based on his abilities alone, which translated into him avoiding all prior information. As a result, he earned a score that had even taken our professor aback—a negative one hundred. It became a legend.

Shuya shook his head rapidly. “B-But! That’s not going to happen this time! I mastered *Purifyre*, so even if history repeats itself, I’ll turn the tables on it!”

“*Purifyre*? You did?”

I feigned ignorance on purpose.

In the field of fire magic, being spectacular was the name of the game. *Purifyre* was effective against monsters of the darkness element, but it wasn’t as potent in terms of healing compared to the water spell *Heal*. That meant that it fell under the category of “forgettable,” so

much so that fire mages rarely attempted to acquire it. In fact, he hadn't learned it in the anime.

"You're kidding me, right? *Purifyre*? Seriously? It doesn't sound like something you'd ever cast."

"I'm not! In the dungeon, I..."

Then, this guy started an entire speech about how he had encountered an arisen in a dungeon and had awoken this spell to save his comrades. He just kept going and going, giving me a detailed account of his heroic saga.

Yeah, yeah, sure, go on, but I know all about it, sorry. That girl reported your activities every day back in that shadowy cave. But well, he probably doesn't know that Prince Neon and I were lurking in the dungeon that turned into his conquest.

"Denning!" He took out his wand and waved it. "Behold! This is the flame that obliterates darkness, *Purifyre*!" As the last word left his lips, a sacred flame flared up on his palm, burning bright and steady.

I stared at him in silence. *That's right. It's this guy's fault that I experienced those hellish days.* Shuya had dug up some terrible memories, and with a darkening face, I threw him out of my room.

In the end, I never got to learn why he had come here in the first place.

A few days had passed since Shuya visited my room. I'd been talking with Claude a lot lately in empty classrooms in the lecture building.

"Hey, Claude. Remember how you mentioned that you might go gray from stress when you became the prince's page? I totally get your pain now. I will never, *ever* go on a journey with Prince Neon again."

Of course, we'd shut the door tight. We took great care to make sure nobody could overhear us while we discussed my hellish trip with Prince Neon, since Claude was the only one I could go grumbling to about this stuff. Whenever we had the chance to meet up, I would tell him about the agony I had suffered. *Of course, I left out the tantrum I threw that one time about wanting out of there. I was pretty pathetic.*

"You say that, Young Master, but I confess you seem very gleeful whenever you bring up Prince Neon."

"E-Excuse me?! What's wrong with you?! Have you forgotten how many times I've griped about him?!"

"But your repetition is proof that it was a very memorable experience for you."

I wanted to tear out my own hair. "You're missing the point! Didn't I make myself clear that I was the furthest thing from happy that whole time?!"

But Claude had this look on his face that said he saw right through me. "Okay, okay. Do not worry, I understand."

Ugh! That journey was so painful! I'd like to see you try finding even one aspect that was fun about it!

I prepared to launch into another rant, going into great detail about the anguish I'd suffered, but someone's voice burst in from the corridor.

"You're such an idiot, Shuya! What in the world have you been *doing* these days?!"

"Ugh, don't nag me, Alicia! It's none of your business!"

"It *is* my business when there are problematic rumors about you, you know?! They saw you rushing into the medical building looking like you were going to throw up at any moment! Are you doing some shady drugs or something?! Hey! Stop right there! Stop running, Shuya!"

The two were as much of a public nuisance as they always were, but I was a little envious of their relationship. *If only I could cast away all my worries and walk together with Charlotte out in the open, just as we are without any pretending, it would be the happiest thing in my life.* In reality, we had to hide away in my room, the only place we could have each other just to ourselves. The lone person I had confided in about this matter was Prince Neon, since he was an exchange student.

I must have been quiet for longer than I had thought, because Claude asked, "Young Master, is there something wrong?"

"Hm? Ah, it's nothing. Okay, back to the topic. Is Prince Neon still a goody-two-shoes?"

"He is a stranger compared to before. He has truly changed after the dungeon expedition with you. Did something of significance happen to him?"

"If you're asking whether I have an idea about why he changed, well, no clue here. Oh, that reminds me. So Claude, you mentioned you wanted to discuss something with me?"

"It concerns the boy you were staring at earlier, Shuya Newkern... How do I put it? The prince seems to have taken a...*different* attitude with him."

I immediately tensed. "Wait. Prince Neon already said that he lost interest in Shuya. You sure about that?"

"That much is true, but now, he seems...worried? He seemed to mention in passing that, to quote him directly, 'If you do not wish for Shuya Newkern to be harmed, I would recommend locking him up in the medical building for a while.'"

I blinked in stupor. "Huh? Don't want Shuya to *what*?"

After Prince Neon had made his return, his interest in Shuya had plummeted remarkably. *He didn't even budge at all inside the dungeon. What in the world has he learned about Shuya while doing nothing, hm?*

For some reason, starting from that day, I began hearing many rumors about Shuya.

“Hey, have you heard about the second-year that’s getting involved with some dodgy drugs?”

“You mean the guy that pretty much hasn’t shown up to any of his recent lectures, right? Uh, what was his name again? That red-haired...”

There was gossip about him camping out in the medical building several days in a row, or about him using some suspicious drugs, or about him sometimes walking around with unsteady feet in the morning like he had a hangover or something.

But... At the time, what I *didn't* know was that Shuya was the only one drawing nearer to the heart of the looming crisis.

Interlude: Shuya's Adventure

"Shuya! Hey man, who would've thought that you cleared a dungeon? I was wrong for thinking that being an adventurer was just a game for you!"

"Could you tell me again about what happened when you were in the dungeon?!"

Overnight, Shuya Newkern had become the man of the hour at Kirsch. His classmates and schoolmates would all gather around him during recesses and after school, celebrating his glorious achievement. Quite a lot of students were actually registered as adventurers, but very few could balance the two with any degree of success.

"What kind of monster was the dungeon master?!"

"You didn't go alone, right? What's your party comp like?! Was there any *looove* in the air between you and a female adventurer?! Hey, we're not strangers! There are no secrets between us!"

But Shuya did not look quite as merry as the kids around him. The adventure he had gone on wasn't anything like the fantastic epic everyone was dreaming up—in fact, it had been the complete opposite. It had been a descent into a dim, inescapable abyss underground, filled with the stench of sweat and dirt mingling in an unpleasant mix as he suffered one hardship after another.

For one thing, the dungeon had been fresh, which meant that there had been no dungeon master. Just arriving at the deepest level of the dungeon had been enough to earn Shuya his new achievement.

"Hey, why the sour face? Don't be so stingy. Tell us all about it!"

Shuya sighed. "Fine. But it's not interesting at all, so don't get your hopes up."

The expeditions of adventurers were harsh—not just physically, but also mentally. Things would have been different if he had gone into the dungeon with trusted comrades, but the sad reality was that his comrades this time hadn't had even a hint of trust and faith in him or in each other. They were only a bunch of self-interested adventurers who had assembled with the goal of clearing the dungeon faster than anyone else.

A team formed on the spot, of course, had a lack of mutual trust. Which meant that the leader was all the more important.

"Okay, so I had the worst time when the arisen showed up. It was awful cuz none of the party could use light magic. Arisen aren't

corporeal, so all we could do was run.”

And so, instead of the fantastical tale everyone was looking for, Shuya chose to narrate his darkest hour, passing on his insight about how difficult it was to unify an adventurer party as the leader.

In his room, Shuya sighed. “I really don’t deserve to be hailed as a conqueror of a dungeon...”

Shuya’s room was located on the second floor of the boys’ dorms. Though he wasn’t sharing a room like the commoners on the first floor, the space he had was still minimal.

He laid back on his bed as he thought back to his dungeon days. “I mean, sure, you could say that it’s great that I cleared a dungeon at all. But now that I think back, I don’t remember seeing any other adventurers. Not a single soul. Something was definitely off. The team said that luck is a big part of success in life, and they all wrote it off that we got lucky, but...”

It was the first time Shuya had ever led an adventurer party, and naturally, it came with a lot of firsts—deciding which path to take, deciding when to take a break, deciding how to split the rations... He even paid attention to the health of each individual so that there wouldn’t be friction between members. Until now, he had always done as he pleased on his adventures, which meant that his recent journey had been much more rigorous in comparison.

“If I hadn’t learned *Purifyre*, I’d probably be pushing up daisies right around now.”

None of his party members had a decent track record in dungeons. So of course Shuya had panicked when one of them wouldn’t wake up, having been possessed by an arisen. Once a person was under the sway of an arisen, the only way of treatment was to expel it with light magic. Prevention was possible if one consumed medicine beforehand to increase their resistance, but that was it. Thus, successfully casting *Purifyre* in that situation had been nothing short of a miracle.

In that moment, Shuya recalled what he heard in class. “*Light magic is indeed effective against darkness-type monsters. But light mages are scarce, and they usually don’t have an affinity for anything to do with fighting or violence. However, do not be disheartened! Even water and fire mages have countless ways of fighting these creatures!*”

“It was all thanks to that lecture that I was able to use that spell...”

Along with Prince Neon, two new professors had appeared at Kirsch. In a sense, these two were both big names.

One was a knight employed by *the* House Denning. Apparently, an affiliate of Denning becoming a professor at Kirsch was unprecedented, which had left everyone speculating about what his

goals must be. The current theory everyone settled on was that the man was investigating this school in search of promising students he could recruit for the military.

His lectures were centered around one thing, and one thing only: methods of combat. Everyone had been afraid of him at first, assuming that he must be a strict, relentless man because of his reputation as a knight of House Denning, but he turned out to be more like a caring and kind older bro— *Uncle*, Shuya corrected himself.

The other new professor, meanwhile, was the woman who had indirectly saved Shuya's life.

"I'm aware that many of you don't take my words seriously! But this I swear... I am only teaching you that which will lead to your survival if a crisis suddenly sneaks up on you!"

Professor Arle had been the one who showed Shuya the key he'd used to get out of that hopeless situation—the *Purifyre* spell. In class, she had brought up spells of various elements that would work against the subjects of darkness, and in Shuya's case, that had been *Purifyre*. He had practiced it in secret, and in the end, those hours hadn't gone to waste.

From what Shuya knew, Professor Arle had recently fallen ill and was hospitalized inside the medical building, which was where he was now. Obediently following the guidance of a staff member had landed him in front of a door, and behind it, he would find her.

Shuya Newkern had been one of the students who had openly opposed Professor Arle, and she was surprised at his appearance on her ward, but she readily received her visitor.

"Sorry. I was wrong... If it hadn't been for your lectures, Professor, I would probably be dead right now," Shuya said in a rueful tone.

He wasn't exaggerating, because her lecture was truly the reason he had begun practicing the spell. Professor Arle had emphasized repeatedly that everyone had to master spells like *Heal* and *Purifyre* to defend themselves against darkness magic.

"I am very happy to hear that my teachings have been helpful to you, Mister Newkern. When faced with darkness monsters, everyone's first instinct is to attempt light magic. But we must not forget that there are many other ways of driving them away."

Shuya's lifesaver had a completely different demeanor than in her lectures—her features were softened by a gentle smile. He was surprised by the discrepancy, but there was something more important at hand. Shuya had been away from Kirsch for a lengthy time during his expedition, and he didn't know why Professor Arle was hospitalized.

"Um, Professor Arle, how did you get so sick?"

She paused before admitting sheepishly, "It's rather embarrassing, but I think I might have worked myself a little too hard. I'm actually quiet and meek at heart, and what you see of me during my lectures is the exact opposite. The heavens are probably trying to tell me that I should settle down a bit."

Seeing her bashful smile, one thing began taking root in Shuya's heart. Students hated Professor Arle's Magic Studies because of the gloomy topics it covered and the tons of homework they had to do. But now Shuya knew better. Professor Arle's performance in class must have come from her passion to pass on what she thought was important to the students. Shuya had escaped a narrow brush with death because of her, and he now knew how life-changing those teachings were when faced with an emergency.

Thus, it was inevitable that he made this declaration: "I want to be useful to you in some way, Professor."

"...Huh?"

He wanted to help her in return. He wanted to express his gratitude with his best effort. And it was just like Shuya to immediately act once he made up his mind.

Feeling Shuya's earnest emotions, Professor Arle blinked her eyes several times from her position lying in bed. Then, she asked, hesitant, "Um... In that case, I have a request if you have the time..."

Then, she began taking in a mild-mannered voice, once again a contrast from her lecture mode.



"Mister Newkern... Could you promise that you will listen to me without doubting what I say, and that you won't tell anyone else?"

There was something Arle had sworn she would do when she came back to Kirsch. She had asked herself what the students needed most while they were still in the middle of their education. She could only provide the best lectures to her pupils if she could answer that question.

"Huh...? Professor Arle, why can't I tell anyone...? Um, are you going to involve me in something dodgy?"

"Ah! Sorry, that's not what I meant. I just don't want anyone else to know that this is on my mind..."

"I won't tell anyone, Professor Arle! Please trust me!"

And during her pondering, Arle realized one thing. The students were still suffering from the deep mental scar that the horde invasion had left, which meant that they needed to understand monsters better. With that in mind, Arle had gone directly to the headmaster and appealed to him for permission to incorporate ways to deal with monsters into her entire curriculum.

“Thank you very much...” Suddenly, Arle groaned.

“Professor Arle, are you still feeling unwell?!”

“I’m fine... It’s just that my health has gotten even worse the past few days...”

Then, Arle’s lectures bore fruit. One of her students, Shuya Newkern, was also an adventurer, and he had been able to defend himself against darkness monsters thanks to her teachings. It had been worth it.

“Is there a specific cause? Did you eat something that disagrees with your body?”

“I would never.” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t follow in Mister Denning’s example, ha ha.”

“I-I thought as much! You’re different from him, after all!”

Shuya had always spoken out against her classes, but in truth, Arle had even thought of him as a disciple from time to time. He was a strange student who would boldly declare his opinion, and he was very hard to dislike. And that was why she decided to confide in him and him alone.

“Mister Newkern, I am sure you are aware, but I was comatose for a long time under the influence of an arisen. Because of that, I can *feel* it. Right now, arisen are gathering in this school.”



“Maybe Professor Arle’s still tired out of her mind. I mean, arisen crowding at Kirsch? We’re not a dungeon...” Shuya muttered to himself.

The request Professor Arle had asked of Shuya was downright bizarre, if he was completely frank, and this was *Shuya*, mind, whose curiosity knew no bounds. Though Shuya had a reputation as an oddball at school, he wasn’t actually as simpleminded as everyone thought. After all his experiences, he had turned wiser, and even a Royal Knight had approved of his talents. He had cleared a dungeon recently, and his abilities had improved as a consequence. But even to this newly changed Shuya, what the professor had said was astonishing.

“Mister Newkern, I am not telling you to go on a blind search. There are several spots in the school that I have set my sights on—places that the arisen might gather. You can use Purifyre, so I am sure that you will know what I mean when you go to those places...”

She had wanted him to investigate in her stead whether arisen were truly amassing at Kirsch. *It sounds absurd, I know.* Along with this request, she had listed three places she wanted Shuya to go and directly scout. The first was a pond that was rumored to have been a hotspot for disposing of illegal drugs. The second was the former site

of a school building that had been torn down during Kirsch's reconstruction, and rumors of this one gossiped that illegal research had been performed on the premises. The last was the cemetery for the monsters that had invaded Kirsch more recently in comparison.

However, before he headed off to these places, Shuya needed to do something first.

Shuya's room on the second floor of the boys' doors was cluttered. Without even a moment of hesitation, he took out a small box he had put away inside the shelf, opened it, then pulled out the object hidden within. It was a transparent crystal ball wrapped in cloth.

"Arisen might have infiltrated the campus. I need your help."

"It has been a while, Shuya. Did you not say that you were not going to use my power anymore?"

"That was my plan, yeah," Shuya said slowly. "But now, I want to rely on your abilities just a tad."

The moment he had taken it out, an ancient, commanding voice had boomed in his head. *Yeah, Slowe was right. Something's definitely fishy about this. Why haven't I questioned it up until now?* It was almost as if the crystal ball had a will of its own.

The guild master of Zenelaus had warned Shuya that it would be in Shuya's best interests to never use it again. A power beyond one's capacity was as volatile as a bomb that would lead to self-destruction. In Zenelaus, Shuya had gained more strength than he needed, and he had lost consciousness somewhere along the way. According to the guild master, Shuya's body had been taken over by this crystal.

"Hm? Arisen, I see. You are a strange one to have an interest in those worthless life-forms."

"Oh, shut up. You've always been good at treasure hunting, right?"

"Arisen have a faint presence. Even I would have trouble detecting them unless they were right next to me."

"That's okay. I have an idea of where they might be."

Shuya left his room with the crystal ball in his hand. Though the warning of the guild master was still fresh in his mind, Shuya was confident. Even the Royal Knights had acknowledged his abilities, and he had even recently conquered a dungeon. Shuya was sure that now, he could control the power hidden inside this crystal ball instead of the other way around. Furthermore, he had always relied on it whenever he had to find something. To him, it was like a good luck charm.

When Shuya dug into it, he learned that the pond said to have once emitted poison gas, along with the cleared-out site with rumors

of illegal research, were apparently both located inside the remains of the old school buildings. They were all the remnants of a dark period in Kirsch's history.

He made his way to the barren plot of land and cast *Purifyre* as the professor had instructed, but he couldn't feel anything.

"Is that human's claim truly trustworthy?"

"Who knows? That's why I'm investigating."

"...You never change, do you? You never fail to act for the sake of others."

If Shuya had hit the big prize, he should have been able to see the arisen clearly when they were annihilated. The arisen were a special kind of life-form that only truly showed themselves when they were on death's door. The forms of their bodies were highly varied: some were animals, some were human, some were monsters, and so on. These silhouettes would emerge like a faint image, and that was what Shuya had to keep an eye out for.

Frankly speaking, Shuya wasn't completely convinced by Professor Arle. He actually thought that the chances of it happening were ridiculous in fact, even if Professor Arle had become sensitive to arisen after her experience.

Shuya's mumbling was like an endless stream that accompanied him while he wandered about the campus in the dead of night. "The professor is right. Her lectures saved me, so she must be right."

Though a part of Shuya was doubtful, it paled in comparison to the gratitude he felt towards Professor Arle.

The professor had been forced into a coma for several months due to an arisen that No Face had summoned. It didn't matter how little—as long as the professor was feeling anxious, Shuya wanted to find the root of the cause and tear it out.

Shuya recalled her words. His next destination was supposed to be...

"Mister Newkern, do you remember the horde invasion? All the monsters killed then, including the black dragon taken down by Mister Denning, were eventually cremated."

"But Professor Arle, I heard that they purified the burnt monsters with light magic before they did that."

"That only works on normal monsters. It's not that easy to completely pacify the regrets and resentment of an ancient being. This is why I believe that the crematory might be attracting the arisen."

He made his way to the gigantic crematory made of stone. Its surroundings were carpeted by short weeds, and as he got closer to

the building and squinted his eyes, he saw that some kind of white powder was falling onto the grass.

The monsters that had attacked the campus on that day were laid to rest in these lands. Even now, he would sometimes have dreams where he was overwhelmed by paralyzing fear as the black dragon made its appearance. Shuya had been able to muster a tiny bit of courage to stand in its way, and though it was only for a brief moment, he was proud of that.

Then, he reached his hand towards the ash as white as chalk on the ground, but... “No way. Why is the ash *warm*...?!”

It was almost as if somebody had cremated something here as recent as a day ago, before sprinkling the remains around. *But if somebody really did burn something here, what would it be?*

He heard the voice of the crystal ball. **“Shuya. Arisen are around. You are surrounded.”**

Definitely, Shuya agreed in his mind. He could never forget what it had felt like when the arisen had turned up inside the dungeon. It had nearly sent all of his comrades into a manic rage. He struggled to describe it, but it felt as if somebody was clawing his heart out of his chest. They were invisible to his eyes, but they were certainly present.

On instinct, his right hand fumbled for the wand at his waist, and he fired off the spell he had mastered inside the dungeon. *“Purifyre!”*

A blinding white flash surged out of the tip of his wand, and the silhouette of several arisen faded into view.

Shuya was panting. His vision blacked out for a moment, and the next thing he knew, he was on his knees. He could still sense arisen around, but he had definitely caused their numbers to plummet—of that, he was sure. After all, *Purifyre* destroyed fiends, though it was an unpopular fire spell because it wasn’t as effective as light spells or *Heal*.

After regaining his breath, Shuya muttered to himself, “I can still feel so many of them, but I guess that’s about it for today.”

All that was left to do was to repeat this cycle as many times as it took, from morning to night, until they were all gone. Then, he could report back to Professor Arle that he hadn’t found anything. He didn’t want to cause her unnecessary stress.

“Pheeew...” A grin curled on Shuya’s lips. He had the feeling that he would have pleasant dreams today.

But that was interrupted by the feeling of something heavy crashing into his back out of nowhere, and he collapsed onto the grass.

“*You...!*” someone yelled with scathing fury.

Pain wasn’t the first thing that processed in his mind. The smell

wafting off the ground made him dizzy. Then, after a throbbing pain spread throughout his back, his mind finally registered the fact that somebody had kicked him.

“Wh-Who’s there?!” he exclaimed.

“...How *could* you?!”

It was a girl’s voice. That was the only thing Shuya was able to figure out, because not a moment later, his body was flying in the air. A force greater than he could ever imagine had blasted him several meters away.

Shuya choked and coughed violently. He lifted a hand to his mouth and felt blood clinging to the corners of his lips. But somehow, he was able to crane his neck, and the person he saw was not a stranger. It was the retainer of the recently calmed down idiotic prince. Shuya had known of her, but because she had always hidden behind the prince, this was the first time he had ever heard her voice.

“...Hey, you’re that guy’s retainer, right?! Did you know that arisen were here?!”

“Don’t...interfere! They’re not...causing any trouble!”

Now that he thought about it, this was the first time he had ever interacted with her properly. Yet, she was openly displaying a ferocious storm of emotions as she intimidated him with her presence.

She swung up her arm, and seeing that gesture, Shuya was paralyzed. He let out a small whimper. *Fear*. Irrational fear had taken over him. It was almost as if she had grabbed him by the neck. If she brought down her arm, Shuya was going to die. He was sure of it.

A few seconds of silence ticked by, but nothing. The girl slowly left the grassy field saturated with the lingering attachments of monsters.

She had looked on the verge of tears before they’d parted, and for some reason, that face would not leave Shuya’s mind. Despite being the victim of a one-sided, violent beating, Shuya was left with a bad taste in his mouth.

On the next day, Shuya was in his bed while his thoughts ran wild. He dragged out a long sigh. “What the hell?”

Just like what he had done the previous night, this evening, Shuya had gone to the place in question to use *Purifyre*. The girl did not appear this time.

He had no clue why Prince Neon’s retainer had been there. *Was she drawn to the arisen or something?*

“I reported that there wasn’t anything to Professor Arle... It was the right thing to do... Yeah, it should be.”

When he had visited Professor Arle, he had said that he couldn’t find anything that was off in any of the spots, including the

crematory. She had looked like a huge weight had been taken off her shoulders, and that expression had further solidified Shuya's decision to keep up the white lie.

"In the end, investing in those things as a countermeasure to arisen turned out to be a really smart choice..."

He had gained a small fortune after clearing that dungeon, and what Shuya had used that money to buy—his adventurer comrades had laughed at him for it—were medicines that would temporarily increase his resistance to outside influences. Among adventurers, it was a medicine infamous for its side effect of making the user feel as if they were half-dead for a few days afterwards.

Shuya went quiet for a moment. He *really* didn't want to do this, but he grabbed one of the packs of powdered medicine on the table. He had felt the presence of countless arisen at the site, and though he wasn't sure yet, it was pointing towards a bone-chilling theory... Professor Arle had also said that the school might have already fallen under the influence of arisen. If Shuya himself was a prisoner of the dream of arisen, he would definitely wake up from it if he swallowed this medicine.

"I might have to take a day off class tomorrow... Ah, but the tests are coming up... If I miss any lectures now, it's not gonna end well for me..."

If the power of the arisen could be compared to poison, then this medicine was far more toxic in comparison. The infamous side effect of the deadly poison would bombard him starting from the day after ingestion. *Paralysis, nausea... You name it. I bet I'll have to rush over to the medical building first thing in the morning.*

"But if I don't end up finding anything, it means that I might have been overthinking things. Yeah, actually, the chances of that are way higher! Which means that I'll only suffer one day from the effects of this medicine. Okay, let's do this."

Shuya hardened his resolve and swallowed.

On that night, Shuya had a curious dream. In that dream, he was walking around Kirsch Mage Institute.

Even though the novelty had long worn off, for some reason, he was thrilled at the familiar sight. *Huh. Actually, when I first entered this school, I think I felt like this every day. Pretty nostalgic.*

However, he immediately realized that it was a dream, because Prince Neon was next to him. On top of that, he even felt *happy* when he saw the man's face, which meant that it *must, must, must* be a dream.

"Master Neon... The arisen unleashed their powers... Everyone's sleeping."

“Excellent job. Hm. Look up. They seem to have run out of patience.”

Slowly, Shuya began lifting his gaze. He thought that the only thing he would see was a well-lit night sky, but what entered his vision was *something* in the upper air staring motionlessly in his direction.

It wasn't a bird. It was a humanoid silhouette. At first, he thought it was a human with wings.

“We have finally found you, Prince Neon.”

You've got to be kidding me. Being an adventurer, Shuya had seen this creature many times in books.

The man continued, “I must say that I am moved by your choice of battlefields. However, if we fail to kill you, our heads will be the ones rolling. Don't resent us for this.”

They were monsters with red eyes—vampires.

Shuya could feel goosebumps rising all over his skin. The vampires were on the top of the pyramid of darkness monsters. They were both cunning and merciless. And there were *dozens* of them leisurely hovering in the sky. One of them crashed down with a clear aim towards Shuya's head, and...

And that was when Shuya woke up.

Shuya gasped. He tried to calm his erratic breathing. “What? Did I just have that dream because I used the medicine? The side effects aren't supposed to be showing up yet, but... All right. Let's get some water first.”

His body was drenched in sweat. He probably owed it to the dream earlier. While wiping it up, he tipped his glass, but before he could drink the water, he realized that an unfamiliar person was standing in the darkness. He got such a shock that he couldn't even scream.

Rubbing at his eyes once told him that, no, his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. The person there was the much-talked-about student who had calmed down recently.

“I applaud you for discovering the truth. Normally, I would praise such shrewdness. But this is my battle.”

In status and in blood, he was many levels more noble than Shuya, but they had already clashed countless times.

“I ask that you forget everything you just saw, and that you stay out of our way.”

But now... The man was imposing. Dignified, just like the first time Shuya had seen him. Unlike all their encounters before, the prince was here in all his royal glory. Shuya began sweating. He didn't know why.

“Shuya Newkern... Please.”

Neon Dustour was bowing his head towards Shuya.

And starting from this moment, Shuya’s days of anguish began, because what should he do?

Chapter 4: Something Is Brewing

Shuya went crazy. Or at least, that was what people were starting to say a few days after he had come back to a hero's welcome.

In my opinion, Shuya was always crazy. He had suddenly left school to explore a dungeon, for example, so I was pretty used to him pulling off ridiculous stunts abruptly. But...

"Wait, that guy went on a rampage inside the medical building...? He really doesn't learn his lesson. Is he arguing with someone again?"

Apparently, Shuya had been carried into the medical building several times over the past few days. I recalled often seeing professors scolding Shuya because he had been nodding off, probably from a lack of sleep. *But to think that he's been coming and going from the medical building for days on end... What has that guy done?*

"And so, to sum it up, Alicia... You want me to do something about Shuya's idiotic behavior. I'm not a mercenary for hire, you know."

"Yes, that's what I want. I know that he's always up to something weird, but this time, well... The idiotic prince of Dustour's here too, remember? Their brawl from a while ago didn't turn into a major incident, thankfully, but if he causes trouble to the idiotic prince, it might not end so well this time. Don't you agree?"

She was the voice of reason. Alicia seemed to worry that Shuya had stuck his head into yet another dangerous incident of some sort. As far as I could tell, ever since Prince Neon had returned from the dungeon, he had been living like a normal student without annoying anyone. A stark contrast from Shuya.

"Alicia, what's all this about Shuya being brought into the medical building?"

"I don't know either. It's just that... He's often unsteady on his feet in the morning, and I think he's probably sneaking out somewhere at night."

"But where?"

"How would I know? That's why I'm asking *you* to investigate what that idiot has been doing!"

Alicia was an expert on how stupid Shuya could get. She probably thought he had involved himself in a tricky situation. Part of me was whining "Why me?" but the other part of me was curious about what

that guy was up to. *Please don't cause any big troubles until Prince Neon leaves, at least.*

"And you, Slowe! Where did you go off to before?"

"Well, I went on a small trip with Prince Neon. Do you want to know where we went?"

"Stop right there. I would prefer to stay far away from anything that smells like hassle, thanks."

"...Very wise."

"Let sleeping dogs lie. I also know that you were sick in bed for a few days after you came back. That idiotic prince dragged you around, didn't he? Leave me out of it."

Alicia rejected my offer firmly. When it came to the topic of the idiotic prince, she always insisted on a nothing-to-do-with-me attitude. The trip across Huzak with Shuya and the Zenelaus incident had probably left her with some bitter memories.

"Okay then, Piggy Slowe. I'm counting on you to take care of Shuya, okay?"

But then she would still come around to say this. Alicia would probably continue to suffer from now on because of her concern for the guy.

"Now then... Where would Shuya have gotten off to?"

I ditched class and searched for the guy. Professor Loco Moco's class had been canceled this afternoon, which was perfect timing. The test was meant to be coming up soon, but that professor regarded practical skill as the most important thing, so I could probably get good results even if I didn't show up to class.

From what I knew, the test involved some sort of trial in the forest, but because monsters had suddenly disappeared from it, the professor had grumbled a while ago that he had to go farther out to scout for some. Personally, I was a little appalled that he had disclosed the contents of the test to me, but well, it was Professor Loco Moco we were talking about.

Okay. The problem at hand was that idiot. *It's not every day that you see a student get carried into the medical building for several days in succession. He suffered so much in the dungeon because of the sabotage of the prince and his retainer, so why has he gone to poke his head into something again? He's really a big magnet for trouble, I swear...*

The afternoon campus was quieter because the test was coming up. Everyone who didn't have classes was likely barricading themselves inside the library and studying.

Which was why Shuya, who was trying to sneak around while watching his surroundings carefully, stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Hey, Shuya. What are you doing?” There was no response. “Shuya! I can see you, you know?! Don’t ignore me...” I stopped in the middle of my attempt to get his attention. “Huh?”

I froze. For a moment, I thought my jaw would drop to the ground. *He’s—*

“Why the hell?!”

Why the hell is that prick holding that crystal ball?!

It was a highly dangerous magical artifact that could be used as a medium to communicate with the Great Spirit of Fire. *Didn’t he seal it away because the guild master of Zenelaus warned him? What in the world is he planning to do at Kirsch with that thing out?*

“Shuya! Hey, Shuya!!! Wait!”

After a pause, his eyes bulged when he spotted me. “Huh?! Denning?! Why are you here? Aren’t you meant to be in Professor Loco Moco’s class?”

“That class is canceled today! Ugh, get over here!”

I dragged him by the scruff of his neck and brought him into a place hidden from view. I faintly heard someone yell, “The Piggy Duke’s extorting people again!”

Hmph, like I care.

I led him into an alley and shoved him into the wall before I knew what I was doing.

“H-Hey! What was that for, Denning?! You’re meant to be in Professor Loco Moco’s lecture right now, aren’t you?! Are you really fine with ditching class?!”

“Shut up and explain to me why the hell you’re holding *that* thing!”

Shuya must have realized that I was referring to the crystal ball, because he had a guilty look on his face. “Ugh, what’s with you all of a sudden? Let go of me!”

“Didn’t the guild master of Zenelaus warn you to never use it again because it’s dangerous? That thing’s a cursed magical artifact! It can and will lead you astray!”

“I...”

“Have you already forgotten what happened to you the last time you used it?!”

Eldred the Great Spirit of Fire slumbered inside this crystal ball. Back in Zenelaus, he had provided Shuya with more power than the guy could control. The guild master and I were the only two people who knew that Eldred resided within the crystal, at least for the moment.

“I know what you’re trying to say, but... This guy’s always been with me, no matter where I went or what I did. Not to mention I’ve lost count of how many times he’s saved me up to this point.”

I wasn't kidding; this crystal ball was truly and extremely hazardous. If Shuya continued to use it, it would further corrupt his mind. I needed to avoid that at all costs. But Shuya chose to continue playing with fire, despite also knowing that there was an eldritch being living inside it.

Shuya continued, "I know that you're being the voice of reason here, Denning. Until a little while ago, I thought the same way. I swore that I would never, ever rely on its powers again..."

He was dodging the question. It wasn't like Shuya to do that.

"But hear me out. I realized something important. When faced with great danger, sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. So let me go."

This time, he was the one glaring daggers at me as he flung away my hand.

I didn't know whether to laugh or to scream. "Excuse me? 'Great danger'? The hell are you talking about? Is your mind still stuck in your adventuring days or something? I mean, I *am*...marginally impressed by the fact that you managed to clear a dungeon, but *think* for once. Right now, Prince Neon is on this campus. You can go poking your head into whatever you want, because that's your own choice. Just make sure you don't cause trouble for the prince, you hear me?"

"That idiotic prince, huh...?" He muttered, then suddenly fell completely silent.

Oi. What's with that reaction? Does this involve the prince or something? To tell the truth, my time in the dungeon has traumatized me... If possible, I don't want to get near that guy ever again.

After a few seconds of dead silence, Shuya lifted his head. He stared at me with a gaze as sharp as a hawk's. "Denning, do you remember the day that the headmaster summoned us two to his office?"

"I do. What does that have to do with anything?"

If I remembered correctly... *That was probably around the time I was trying to change everyone's impression of me. Together with Charlotte, I came up with a lot of different strategies, like the operation to make friends. And when I was eating in the dining hall, the headmaster summoned me, and... The headmaster told Shuya and me about the shadows that were lurking inside the school. I remember celebrating for finally being a part of a protagonist-worthy quest.*

"You were the one who found No Face back then, right? I couldn't do a thing from outside the barrier Professor Loco Moco summoned to keep the collateral damage at bay. Even now, I distinctly remember how powerless and frustrated I felt back then. Alicia was nearly kidnapped from right under my nose, but I was completely oblivious. I

didn't notice a thing."

Slowly, I muttered, "I remember."

No Face had been leading Alicia away, and then Alicia had said the code words that only I knew about. If she hadn't done that, No Face would have slipped out of my grasp and handed over her information to Dustour.

I furrowed my eyebrows. "So? I repeat, what does that have to do with anything now?"

"It's going to be different from last time. I wanted to tell that to you and you alone, Denning."

"Which means that you...noticed something? What?"

Shuya tightened his grasp on his crystal ball. "I'll deal with it this time. It's my turn, not yours."

Huuuh? Seriously, what the hell? You know, it really sounds like you're jinxing yourself or setting yourself up for disaster when you say something like that. Please don't. I suddenly had the impulse to snatch that crystal ball away.

Shuya exhaled slowly. "Yeah, you're right, the guild master did tell me to never use this artifact again. But here's the deal. He also told me that a tool is only as good as its user. And right now, I think that I need this guy's power. I'll give you one warning, just in case. Be wary of that idiotic prince."

Shuya didn't have any of his brash, impulsive nature in his demeanor when he said that—quite the opposite, in fact. *I think I can see why so many powerful people are partial to him.*

Shuya left, leaving me stunned stupid.

Only one phrase could express what I was feeling: "What the hell...?"

But now, I knew one thing for sure. With the way he was acting, it made sense that people would gossip about him acting weird. Right now, there was a certain aura to him that seemed to distance him from everyone who approached him. *Jeez... What in the world happened while I was recovering from my dungeon trauma?*

"'Be wary of Prince Neon,' he says? Hmph. I don't need him to tell me that."

Neon Dustour was so important that Claude had been assigned to guard him. He was a big name inside the Dustour Empire, and assassination attempts had been a part of his daily life. In the anime, he hadn't appeared at all so I didn't know for sure, but I felt like he was definitely hiding something. The most important mysteries were probably his reasons for coming to Kirsch and why he had been so fixated on Shuya.

I let out a long sigh. "This smells like trouble. If Shuya of all

people is making a move, it's definitely a sign that something big is brewing."

Shuya had started snooping about. That must've been significant. After all, he seemed to have a protagonist halo that often lured him into the eye of storms.

"Should I try asking Prince Neon? No, he'd probably just dodge my questions, which means that... I should try to carve an opening for myself through that girl instead."

His retainer, who shadowed his every step, was somewhat careless. Out of the two, Suz would be the one to slip up.

My eyes widened as a surprising sight pulled me out of my thoughts. "That's...Charlotte?" And she was even with Suz, of all people.

When the prince had first come to Kirsch, he had gone off to pester every single person he could find, but Suz was different. This was the first time I had ever seen her having a heated conversation with anyone at school.

The two walked into the dining hall.

"The dining hall?" I quirked an eyebrow. "Meal time should be over by now, so why are they heading in...?"

It didn't take too long before I learned what Charlotte and that retainer with monstrous strength had been doing in the dining hall.

Later in the evening, I was relaxing in my room when there was a knock on the door. Three times at regular intervals meant that it was Charlotte. Lately, my nightly conversations with Charlotte had become my precious moments of respite.

Snorting, I opened the door, and there was another person behind Charlotte.

"Eat it..."

It was the prince's retainer, the girl who had tormented Shuya behind the scenes in that dungeon. *Now, who would've expected that she, of all people, would bring over food and tell me to eat up?*

"I made a lot, so... Eat it..." she muttered.

I was puzzled. "Hold up, explanations first."

"Oh. Sorry, Master Slowe, yeah, this is a little abrupt, isn't it? But Miss Suz went through all that effort to cook this, so please give us some time to prepare first." Charlotte turned around. "Miss Suz, here, follow me."

"Okay..."

"As for you, Master Slowe, please wait a moment. We'll call you once we're done!"

I was allowed into my room only a few minutes later. What

greeted me was an entire selection of steaming dishes. It was a magnificent spread—the first things I saw were salads in vibrant colors, seafood dishes so fragrant that it made my stomach start to rumble, as well as sausages arranged into a fine display on a plate.

“Charlotte, you didn’t make this,” I said with conviction.

“Me.” Suz pointed to herself. “It was me.” She had a mildly triumphant look on her face.

“Miss Suz is *amazing*! Even that stubborn head chef praised her, saying that she has talent! And the head chef rarely praises *anyone*!”



“If you follow the instructions properly... Anyone can cook...”

Suz was *embarrassed*, of all things. *Well damn, she’s really cute! Well, well... Prince Neon has a pretty good eye, hm?*

But first, I had to ask this. “Why give these to me, though?”

“Poison tasting before I cook for Master Neon...”

Uh, wouldn’t taste testing be more appropriate? I didn’t voice my stupid thoughts. I dug right in.

As for how the food tasted, well... *Let’s just say that it’s a hundred times more delicious than Charlotte’s cooking.*

Perhaps satisfied with the outcome of her cooking, Suz left pretty quickly after tidying up the dishes. She was efficient, clever, and willing to put in the hard work.

“Hey, Charlotte, when did you two become friends?”

“After you came back, Master Slowe. We started talking from time to time, and today, Miss Suz came up to me and asked me to teach her how to cook!”

Actually, when we were camping out in the wild, Prince Neon mentioned that the food at Kirsch was delectable. Back in his homeland, his meals were often spiked with poison, so rarely could he ever eat with his guard down, according to him.

Charlotte continued, “Speaking of Miss Suz, though, I feel like she’s changed lately. At first, she was like a porcupine with all her spikes out, but she seems to have warmed up to you.”

“To *me*? Oh please, that’s ridiculous. That girl is the same as before—as cold as ice towards everyone but Prince Neon.”

“That’s not the case at all. When we were cooking, she talked a lot about you.”

“She *what*?”

“She mentioned how you worked really hard, and how she changed her opinion of you. She said that you accomplished something impressive, and that if she were in your shoes, she definitely wouldn’t have endured.”

I clenched my jaw. “That stupid, *stupid* prince...”

I remembered what he had said about that meaningless time inside that dungeon. *Hah, if Suz were in my position, it would be a breeze for her, you say? But look at the truth! Even in her eyes, my days there were pretty much unbearable torture!*

“That reminds me. Miss Suz mentioned that she admired my relationship with you. That’s strange, though, since she seems like she gets along with Prince Neon pretty well.”

“Ah. About that, Charlotte... On our way back from the dungeon, well... The prince kind of, you know, found out about our

relationship.”

There was a loud crashing sound. A plate had smashed onto the ground.

“Wh... *Whaaat*?! What do we do?! That’s a big problem! W-Wait, does... Does Miss Suz know about our relationship too?”

“P-Probably, yes...?” I muttered in a small voice.

“Huuuuuuuuuh?! ”

Our relationship was top secret. Public displays of affection, in fact, were completely out of the question. It was a scandal with me, the former Piggy Duke, after all.

Charlotte cupped her cherry-red face, and it took her a long time before she finally calmed down.

“You’re horrible, Master Slowe! Why didn’t you tell me earlier...?”

“S-Sorry...”

However, I was happy. These trivial, mundane moments were what I had wished for—a future where I could smile together with Charlotte every day. Away from conflicts, away from troubles... Just the two of us and peace in our hearts. In my mind, I secretly made the resolution to spend more alone time with Charlotte.

“Oh... I just remembered this, but... Miss Suz had a message for you. Apparently, they’re leaving Kirsch soon.”

I...didn’t know that.

Prince Neon and his retainer had appeared in Kirsch out of nowhere like a gust of wind. The prince was such a free spirit that sometimes, it was easy to forget that he hailed from Dustour, a nation that we nearly waged war against, and he had thrown the entire school into chaos. But now, they were going to leave. And without notice, at that.

Charlotte continued. “She said that Prince Neon wants to express his gratitude for everything in person, and...”

The invitation letter that Charlotte had handed over to me had a map on it, and it displayed the location of Prince Neon’s abode. I followed the directions on it carefully.

“Am I really heading in the right direction...?” I muttered.

I didn’t think Prince Neon would mess up, considering how thorough he was with everything.

I was heading in the opposite direction of the surrounding students, who were rushing out of the lecture building because classes had just ended. Climbing the stairs, I approached the highest floor. Then, I came across a rusted metal door, which probably should have been locked originally. I placed my palm against it and tried pushing.

For a moment, I doubted my eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding

me...”

The rooftop of the lecture building had a view overlooking the campus. And here, on the very top of the building I usually listened to lectures in, was a hammock. The person who had summoned me was reading a book in it, whiling the time away with a gentle rocking.

The door shut by itself, and with that sound, the prince placed his book onto the desk positioned next to the hammock.

“Prince Neon...” I was in disbelief. “Have you been living *here* this entire time?”

“You should be honored. You are the first in this school to receive an invitation from me.”

“So this is why Claude refused to talk about your residence... If I learned about this, I would not be able to sit still. A *prince* living in such a humble environment would be...”

There was a small shack on the rooftop that I didn’t remember ever seeing before. Even children from noble families in Daryth would complain if they were made to stay here, so how could a prince live in such a thrifty place?

However, the person in question, Prince Neon, didn’t seem bothered at all as he lay leisurely on his hammock. “It has a place to sleep in, and a roof to stave off the rain. How is this humble? And, Piggy Duke, do you not think that this place is paradise in comparison to that dungeon?”

“I...”

I couldn’t come up with any rebuttals, because he was right. It was the height of comfort when he put it like that.

“Furthermore, I can even survey the entire campus from here. There is no place more fitting for a king. Though that elder was rather disapproving of my choice.”

“I believe that is the normal response. You are the second prince of the almighty Dustour Empire! How could we bear for you to live in such a place? If another country hears about this, we’ll be a laughingstock. What kind of host are we?”

The sun straddling the horizon was illuminating the prince’s face brilliantly, and I couldn’t help but think about how fate tied us together in such a bizarre way.

He barked out his signature laugh. “Almighty? Do not say things you do not believe in, Piggy Duke. I am very aware how deep the south’s hatred for my homeland runs. And you should know that too.”

On the shabby table next to the hammock, there was a feast. *Oh yeah. Suz asked for Charlotte’s help to procure some ingredients. If she made this by herself, then she truly is talented in the culinary arts. Wow.*

“Suz mentioned that somebody from this school taught her cooking. I owe you thanks for that as well. It is not every day that she

bows her head and requests to be someone's pupil. She seems to have taken an interest in you two."

"She has?"

"Indeed. Or perhaps more accurately, in your relationship. So, have you heard from Suz about the reason for your presence here today?"

"Charlotte told me that you might be leaving this school soon."

"Exactly. And I was under your care in many ways, so I owe you such a formality."

W-Well, yeah. I know that I did end up helping him in a bunch of ways, in the end. I told Claude to aid the prince in whatever way he could, not just as his bodyguard. When Prince Neon was intrigued in Shuya, I ended up camping out in a dungeon for around a week with this guy.

I hesitated. "I must say that it is rather sudden."

This exchange student from Dustour had wreaked havoc at Kirsch. He talked to everyone regardless of status, and though he was somewhat forceful when he pestered people, as an individual, he was a difficult man to truly hate.

The first time I had seen Prince Neon was during his introduction. Back then, he had the dignity and authority fitting for a Dustour prince—a man who was born into prestige and power. However, now, I had a different impression of this guy. He was a fellow human being, just like you and me. He was trouble all right, but at the same time, I knew I could talk to him about anything. I was actually thinking that I would miss him a little after he left, which surprised me.

"I would prefer that you do not see me off. As for those whom I owe a debt of gratitude towards—Piggy Duke, I apologize in advance for the hassle, but I ask that you thank them in my stead."

"Can you not tell them that yourself?"

"Aha ha! Well, I was planning on troubling you to the bitter end, you see."

"I would really appreciate it if you refrained from doing that." I sighed. "But Prince Neon, where are you heading off to afterwards?"

He had come south from the empire to Daryth, to Kirsch. He seemed to be taking many lectures, but he hadn't made friends that he would hang out with every day yet. *Did he only come here out of curiosity since the tension between the empire and the south has lessened?*

The silence stretched for a little too long, and I couldn't help but prompt him. "Prince Neon?"

Was he going to return to his country, or was he going on to somewhere else in the south? The prince had come to the south accompanied only by a single young girl who proclaimed to be his bodyguard, so I honestly had no clue.

However, the prince didn't answer my question. Instead, he said,

“Piggy Duke, I am in a good mood at the moment. I will answer one question that you have—no matter what it may be. But only one.”

Does he mean that as a reward because he caused me so many headaches? I scanned the desk. There were a few empty bottles lying on it, but he didn’t look drunk. What I was sure of, however, was the fact that he truly was in high spirits.

There were thousands of things I wanted to ask him. Insider information about Dustour, the plans of the Great Spirit of Darkness, the reason he had come to Kirsch...

But there was one thing that weighed heavier than everything else in my mind. Something that had been bothering me ever since we had returned from the dungeon.

“Prince Neon. Your retainer is not a human, is she?”

Yes. I was curious about his retainer—that mysterious girl who always stayed by his side. Suz was another person whose impression in my mind had changed dramatically compared to our first meeting. In the beginning, I had thought of her as a taciturn girl who was difficult to get along with. But now, things had progressed to the point that she began learning how to cook along with Charlotte in the kitchens.

And...I had an idea about her true identity.

Prince Neon was probably caught a little off guard by my question. His eyes narrowed. “If she is not a human, then what is she? She certainly looks like one.”

“Your retainer is a monster... A humanoid spirit. A djinn.”

For once, the prince froze, and there were a few seconds of absolute silence. Then, giving me a sidelong glance, he asked, “And? Why might you think that?”

“You have your secrets, and I have mine.”

In the dungeon, Prince Neon had said that she was a mage, but there had been no signs at all of light spirits aiding her. I had the special ability to see spirits, so that lie wouldn’t work on me. She was pretty much like a spirit herself, so there was no way that the spirits of nature would help her out in the form of magic.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

The djinn were a monster of the ogre subclass of monsters. They could end one’s life without even making bodily contact, and such divine power earned them the nickname ‘Avatars of the Gods.’ Their fearsome abilities caused them to earn the hostility of both humans and monsters, and their numbers had drastically decreased over time.

They were a type of monster that adored the taste of solitude in the first place, and because of that, we humans had already presumed them to be extinct. However, no matter how much I investigated, I couldn’t get any more detailed information. Maybe if I were in the

capital instead, I would have had better luck.

“Ah, well, if you do not wish to talk about it, Prince Neon, that is completely fine. We all have our little secrets.”

This was my way of getting back at the prince with a little jab, since he had dug up the relationship between Charlotte and me. If he ended up denying my accusations, I planned on laughing it off as a joke.

However...

“Correct. Suz is not a human.”

The prince betrayed my expectations by showing approval.

“You admitted that rather readily,” I said slowly.

“There is no need to hide it, after all.” With a big grin on his face, Prince Neon grabbed the last bottle of wine on the desk and downed it in one gulp.

I didn’t know how it worked in Dustour, but in the south, having a monster as one’s retainer was preposterous. One could argue that Suz was too human to be categorized as a monster, and that there were even legends of an age when djinn had coexisted with humans, but that still wasn’t good enough.

“Prince Neon. I am rather surprised that djinns still exist, but more than that... Beings like them do not bow their heads to humans. They are prideful monsters that lived in ancient times and had the ability to kill without even touching their target.”

“You seem rather informed about the matters of the djinn. Indeed, she is prideful and solitary at her core. A long time ago, I was blessed with the opportunity to take her under my wing when I found her on the brink of death, you see. At first, she refused all the alms I offered up to her, but somewhere down the line, she became attached. I have often told her that she has already repaid her debt of gratitude twice over and that she does not have to serve me any longer, but you know the outcome. She might not seem like it, but she has an extraordinary sense of duty.”

“I suppose when you get to the level of a Dustour prince, the monsters that yield to you are also just as out of this world. To my knowledge, the most impressive examples we have in the south are necromancers ruling over zombies.”

“Zombies... If Suz was a zombie instead, I would have likely been spared from all this anguish.”

“What does that mean?”

“We are the same, Piggy Duke. Like how you love that retainer of yours, I love Suz.”

Prince Neon looked into the distance. In that moment, his features and his demeanor combined was the picture of beauty itself, and anyone would be enthralled once they took a look. For a while, I even

forgot to breathe as I stared at him, entranced.

But then, I came back to reality, and a belated realization dawned on me. *Wait a minute. This guy. He just. Said. What?!*

He continued, “It feels surprisingly pleasant to put it into words. Ah, before I forget, I shall tell you one thing. If you ever need to find me in the future, do not come to this place. Rather—”

And then, before I knew it, night had cast a shadowy curtain on the sky.

“Is this for real...?”

I was hiding in a bush outside the boys’ dorms. My target was Shuya, who seemed to be poking his head into some dangerous business. I planned on tailing him when he came out. I already had confirmation that Shuya had eaten and returned to his room a few hours ago, and that he was still there in the present.

However, my concentration was slipping away from me. I knew the thief—Prince Neon’s declaration. *He actually...*

“Is *he* for real...?”

A prince wanted to walk hand in hand with his *retainer* down the path of his life. And she wasn’t even a human, but a monster. Prince Neon’s wish was a road that was much more perilous than mine. I couldn’t think of any strategies that could make a prince and monster couple work out. *But... Knowing that guy, he’s probably going to scoff and say, “So?”*

Ugh, I planned on spending tonight monitoring Shuya, but I can’t stop thinking about what happened with the prince.

I muttered to myself, “Speaking of Shuya, what the heck is he doing?”

As time ticked away, the traffic at the entrance of the boys’ dorms had decreased considerably. The glow from the windows also disappeared one by one. The only thing I could count on was the gentle company of moonlight.

I frowned. Based on my estimations, nearly an hour had passed since I had seen the last student returning to the dorms. *Is that guy going to make an exception today, instead staying obediently in his room? Then, what am I doing, hiding here inside the bushes? I must look like a fool...*

To go back or not to go back, that is the question. My mind weighed these two choices in an endless loop, and gradually, drowsiness began taking over.

I sighed. At this rate, I might end up falling asleep without realizing it.



“Master XXXX. There’s another present... That makes twenty...”

“Trash it. It is not going to be anything of significance.”

The unfamiliar room was filled with clutter. Paintings hung on the wall, jewels were scattered carelessly on the table, and a chandelier dangled from the ceiling. It was a room so lavish that I was sure I had never seen it before, but the problem was that it didn’t feel lived-in at all.

Ah. This is a dream.

Some nights recently, I would have this mysterious dream. I always forgot about them when I woke up, but I could always recall them vividly when I was in one of these. These dreams were strange. I would turn into someone else, and I even knew what this person was thinking.

“I’m hungry. Can I eat this?”

The girl who had just talked to me had hair that reminded me of Charlotte’s. She had grown a little since the last dream I had. I deduced that this dream was set a few years after the night I had taken her under my wing.

“You can, but your stomach might have an unpleasant experience. Hey. Did you hear what I just said?” I was exasperated.

“...My tongue tingles.”

“See?”

“But *I* can eat it... Poisons for humans don’t work on me...”

I had assigned her the job of being my attendant. Her main task was throwing out the “gifts” people sent my way.

It was my birthday today, and as such, I received presents from all over the nation. They were almost threatening to cram this room to the brim.

The girl, who seemed healthier than in my last dream, looked as curious as a kitten. She opened boxes and peered into them, sometimes even sniffing around. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

Meanwhile, I was watching her from my sitting position on a chair. “If it does not pose a danger for you, you may eat all the foodstuffs. They are likely all laced with poison, but they took great pains to make these. It would be a waste to dispose of them.”

From the looks of things, my days were not boring in the least, for assassination attempt after assassination attempt spiced it up. They were so creative about their methods, in fact, that I was impressed by their extensive repertoire.

“Ah, Master XXXX. I can hear the footsteps of that scheming fox again...”

“Chase them away. Tell that fox that only death awaits if he comes to my room again. Ah, and pass this on as well. I know everything—including the fact that he is the mastermind behind it

all.”

Those who would send me presents all fell under two categories: they were either highly respected in this nation or they were in positions of power. They all claimed that they wished to be my guardian, but I could see through every last one of them. The only thing reflected in their eyes when they looked at me was my right to the throne. Being troubled over selecting the trustworthy ones was a waste of time in my opinion—I would rather choose to trust no one. That way, it was much easier to maintain peace of mind.

“That guy said that you hate humans. That it would be more accurate to call you a monster freak. I think he found out about the dragonling we hid on the Aras Iceberg...”

I roared with laughter. “Hah! So he did! I approve! He calls me a monster freak, hm?”

How could I ever trust humans when every second of every day was proof that I should do the opposite? Monsters were much more trustworthy, and it was only natural that I had come to such a conclusion.



Birdsong startled me awake. There was a prickly sensation on my cheeks. I lifted my head sluggishly.

For a moment, I was utterly thrown off by the feeling of grass that was taller than my head. The ground was hard, and my clothes were dirty. Slowly, I recalled what had happened.

“No way...”

From the looks of things, I had fallen asleep while I’d been waiting for Shuya to come out last night. I could clearly remember what I’d been doing before I’d been whisked into the land of my dreams. The astonishing declaration of Prince Neon just wouldn’t leave my mind back then, and I had been wrestling with a complicated mix of emotions.

However, I didn’t feel terrible at all despite sleeping outside in such conditions. Maybe I had my trip with the prince to thank for that, since I had come out of it with more endurance. My mind was strangely clear.

Then, I heard an appalled voice echoing out from beyond the trees. “Huh? Young Master, what in the world are you doing in such a place?”

“I was...sleeping,” I muttered.

The person standing there had good timing, because I was just thinking about looking for him.

“Don’t get the wrong impression, Claude. I’m not a weirdo who

likes sleeping on the side of the streets. What you saw just now was... Well, I was birdwatching."

In my room, I rambled on while sipping hot tea. My excuses were rather unconvincing. A while ago, Charlotte thought that I had an upset stomach because I'd eaten dubious food off the ground, and I didn't want even more people to look at me with those eyes.

I coughed. "Okay, so, what business do you have with me this early in the morning?"

"Prince Neon has made a new request pertaining to Shuya Newkern. It is quite a...*unique* request, and I am rather bewildered."

I sighed. "This again? Okay, what does the prince want this time?"

"He wishes for me to restrain the boy inside the medical building and prevent any method by which he might leave. He said that if left to his own devices, the boy might lose his life."

"What? Wait, wait, wait, what's with *that*? Actually, do those two even interact nowadays?"

"Not at all. As you know, Prince Neon became a lot more reserved after he went into the dungeon with you. And as far as I know, they do not have the chance to see each other at all."

Prince Neon had lost all interest in Shuya after that journey, claiming that the guy wouldn't get in his way. But now, he ate his own words and was demanding Shuya's confinement inside the medical building. *What in the world? And why is Shuya at risk of dying if we don't tie him up?*

I sucked in a deep breath. "Thank you for telling me, Claude. I'll force the answer directly out of Shuya."

I was determined to interrogate Shuya until he caved and told me about what he was up to. With my heart set, I headed towards the medical building, where he was probably at. I passed the gates, then the pond, and finally, I reached the tranquil area of rest that was isolated from the boisterous school life.

Or it was supposed to be, if it weren't for this commotion.

"You tried to escape again!" someone shouted.

"Let me out! This isn't a fatal injury or anything!"

I found Shuya, wrapped in a cocoon made from sheets, looking very much like a caterpillar.

"What the heck are you doing?!" I yelled.

The exasperated water mage, a doctor here, turned to face me. "Lord Denning! This youth has been sneaking out of here for three days in a row. I cannot even believe what I am saying... I have never had such a patient before. Young Lord of House Denning, could you please persuade him as well?"

I fought the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. "Shuya, what are

you even *thinking*? You are a noble. You should act like one!”

“Don’t nag me, Denning. You’re one to talk. You’re supposed to be in Professor Loco Moco’s lecture right now, aren’t you?”

“That professor’s pretty lazy about stuff like that, so he probably didn’t even notice my absence. More importantly, have you gotten involved in something dangerous? Those wounds you’ve got there definitely aren’t from a mere intensive nighttime training session.”

“Hey, Denning... Do you remember what I said a while ago?” he said slowly.

I looked at him incredulously. “Excuse me?”

“I told you that I’ll deal with it this time... But it might be too much for me to handle... I mean, it’s not like I’m too weak or anything. It’s more of, well, a different problem...”

Ah, he’s referring to how he declared he’d tackle the incident alone this time, just like how I saved Alicia alone a while ago. Why has he changed his attitude so much, though?

He looked me in the eye. “Promise me that you won’t tell anybody else about what I’m about to say.”

This school was currently a den for arisen, or so Shuya claimed. It was crazy, and even somebody with an open mind like me had trouble digesting that information.

“Young Master... Are you sure about what you just said?”

“Claude, I understand your shock. I admit, I’m also only half-convinced at the moment.”

Shuya insisted that a mass of arisen was gathering at Kirsch and that every single night, all the humans on campus were imprisoned in our own dreams by these creatures, unable to be roused until they released us. It sounded so ridiculous that I even considered leaving Shuya behind in the middle of his speech and going back to my room.

And there had been more to his story. He had sounded even more ludicrous when he had declared that Prince Neon was fighting against monsters while everyone else was deep asleep.

“Let’s assume he’s speaking the truth for now. In that case, is it possible to break out of an arisen’s dream if you’re trapped?”

“That is impossible. You would probably be even oblivious to the fact that you are dreaming. However, I hear that in some countries, there is a certain type of medicine circulating around, and that can be used to combat the Night of the Arisen.”

“I have that, actually.”

I placed it on the table. It was dark brown and looked very dubious. Claude flinched the moment he saw it as revulsion distorted his expression.

It was an item of the “finest quality” that every adventurer and

traveler would have heard of. It was a medicine made by first boiling the bodily fluids of monsters that lived in bogs into an extract, then mixing it with pills. Upon consumption, it would temporarily boost the user's resistance towards various debilitations and negative influences. However, this wasn't too different from fighting poison with an even more potent poison, and it was infamous for its terrible backlash on the second day.

I sighed. "He doesn't have any concrete evidence to back him up. But I'm going to try using this tonight."

"Are you serious about that?"

Claude's expression stiffened after he saw it, and my guess was that he probably knew its effects very well.

If I drank it, I would probably be able to wake from an arisen's dream.

Shuya had been the one to give this to me. He had said, *"I need your help."*

At that point, I had been pretty much done with this nonsense, but he had insisted, *"Your eyes will open to a new world with this, I promise! Just listen to me, Denning! Trust me just once and swallow this after dinner!"*

Shuya in his cocoon form had looked deathly pale, and from that sunken face I could gather the implications of using this medicine. A human with common sense would hesitate about using it.

"I have a bad feeling about this. Just in case, I'll pass on some medicine to you as well. You don't have to believe me. After all, you probably would be indisposed tomorrow if you use this tonight."

"Do you believe in what he said, Young Master?"

"I don't. It's raving mad. How could arisen be blanketing this entire school? But it's not like I'm losing a lot from giving it some consideration and checking it out. It's a different case for you, though, since you're in charge of lectures. Unbearable, even. You'd feel like you're in a drunken stupor for several days."

By sheer coincidence, I had experienced the dream of an arisen back in that dungeon. My experience told me that if this school were truly under their influence, we could be completely dead to the world while we were asleep. Anything could be happening outside, but we would be oblivious. Which meant that there was a chance Shuya was right.

There was a moment of silence.

Claude was clearly conflicted about this matter. Sometimes when I walked around the school, I would see him surrounded by crowds of students. He was a teacher popular in a different sense from Professor Loco Moco—people admired him for his caring and responsible nature.

The midterm exams were soon too. They had been shifted slightly due to the school's reconstruction. The hard work we put into studying every day would be turned into merciless numbers rating our results. Practical Magic, Professor Loco Moco's lecture, was especially difficult to pass. And I knew that many students were going up to Claude for advice about combat. If he drank this medicine, it wouldn't be any different from breaking all his promises with them.

I continued, "This isn't an order at all. I mean, I don't believe it either, and there's no concrete proof. At any rate, I'll see how things go today, so you don't have to worry about it. Ah, but don't laugh at me if I can't walk in a straight line tomorrow, okay?"

"Young Master, why did you choose to tell *me*?"

"Because, well, Prince Neon might have a part in this. It's just a possibility, though. You were sent to Kirsch to be his guard, and I owe you an explanation."

It was then that I noticed something. Claude had hung his head the entire time.

He replied, "Are you suspecting that Prince Neon is summoning all the arisen?" He hesitated. "That is an impossible feat. Arisen do not have consciousnesses."

"You make a good point, and I agree. That's why I still have my doubts."

However, Claude ended up accepting the medicine that I had received.

He said, "As his guard, I need to understand what he is doing. If danger is closing in, then I need to stay by his side, because he is my employer, and this is my job."

He was such a genuine man. It made sense that the students chose to place their faith in him.

Then, the corners of his lips curled into a small smile as he said, "Not to mention, now that I mull over it, I discovered that I have yet to perform any of the duties of a bodyguard. I cannot let this go on."

Later that evening, I braced myself, choked down the medicinal cocktail, and crawled into bed. I felt my pulse quicken ever so slightly.

The side effects were different for each individual. Some, like Shuya, experienced the most severe symptoms, some were just sick in bed the entire day like they were down with a common cold. *What in the world will I experience?* The thought alone made dread weigh heavily on me, and I took out a small bottle from the shelf. In it was a clear liquid with a bluish tint.

"Let's take it out and put it on the desk, just in case. I don't think I'll end up drinking it, though."

It had been a gift from the Great Spirit of Light I had received some time ago. It was the supreme hi-elixir that was fabled to be even

capable of snatching the dead from the embrace of death if their departure to the underworld was recent enough. I had pleaded with Lord Lectrikuhl for just one dose in case I needed it one day. Looking at it was enough to soothe my anxiety and give me some peace of mind.

“Guess I’ll try to sleep now...”

If the school was truly under the influence of the arisen, forcing myself to stay awake was futile. Nobody could resist their power.

And then I had a most curious dream.



All the most recent dreams I’d had up to this day had been blurry in some way. Distant. Tonight, however, was different.

There was a drawn-out scream forged of anguish, of torment, and of pure fury. It took me a long moment to realize it came from me.

My most precious retainer lay limp in the grass. She had been in the middle of casting a special spell, and the battle wouldn’t begin until she was done. That had been the rule of this battlefield.

But they had set their sights on a loophole that they exploited at the very last moment.

My mind went blank. Nothing would process. She lay face up, something sharp protruding from her chest and glistening under the moonlight. A blade stained with crimson. My precious retainer had collapsed in a pool of her own blood.

It was too real to be a dream. I swear, I could even *smell* it.

“Where?! Where *are* you?! You are doomed, do you hear me?! I will end your life with my own two hands!”

Only a day ago, she had cooked for me. She was a girl of few words, but our hearts were always connected.

I crouched down and leaned down to look at the face of my treasure. We were so close that our breaths mingled and nearly melted into each other. Never before had I seen her up close like this.

After a moment of silence, I begged, “Forgive me. I was too careless.”

“Run...”

This beautiful girl, this precious girl who was more important to me than anything and anyone else in my life, was telling me to leave. To flee.

And so, I replied, “I will never abandon you here. We go together, or not at all.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something, but I gave her a look of warning. “Do not speak any further.”

The creature floated in the sky. Its fangs were conspicuously

sharp, and its cloak fluttered in the night wind, its servants ever close by its side.

“Hey there, widdle pwince. It seems that you have been rather cruel to my servants.”

Detestable. Downright revolting.

That monster had attacked her. The one with black eyes. A scorching fire burned in my chest, and I wanted to reduce the creature there before me to ash.

“I can tell, little pwince. You’re angwy. Is the djinn over there *that* important to you?”

“Why are you here in these lands?” My voice was flat and came out through clenched teeth.

“Who knows? But Oualdi, I have taken down that nuisance of a djinn. Now, even a servant as useless as you would be able to kill that widdle prince, right?”

“Yes, Lord Giabalham!”

I held up my wand. And this was when a realization suddenly hit me. This wand didn’t belong to *me*. Questions sprouted one after another in my mind, but I couldn’t stop my body. I aimed towards those damned vampire leeches flying in the air, and—

“Hm? Oualdi, someone’s heading our way. That’s...one of this country’s knights? Huh. This is turning out to be pretty interesting, so let’s stay our hand. After all... You there, little prince. Wouldn’t you also like some time to bid farewell to your beloved djinn?”

“Wake up, Denning!”

Someone was yelling at me. Their voice sent my head spinning and my vision swimming. *Oh, shut up. I was having a nice dream here, ya know. Lemme sleep some more...*

“Hey! Wake up already! Hey, are you deaf or something, you fatty?!”

That remark hit so far below the belt that my eyes snapped open. On reflex, I swatted the hand and hollered, “What did you just say?! Who’re you calling ‘fatty’?! Even if I’m pretty chubby, there are some names you should never call people, ya know?!”

My eyes focused, and Shuya was there. He chewed on his lip anxiously as he looked down at me.

And I finally realized that, *Oh. That was a dream.* I let out a sigh of relief. *That was a really vivid dream, though.*

I creased my eyebrows. “Oi, Shuya. Did you just barge into my room without permission?” *That’s called trespassing, you know.*

“Denning! Ugh, don’t you remember what I told you?! Anyway, there’s no time for that. Watch out! Those guys are coming!”

“Huhhh? What’s with you all of a sudden?”

“Shut up and get over here, Denning! Everything’ll make sense once you look out the window!”

“Hey! Don’t grab my arm!” I yelped. “Ugh, what the hell...?”

I got out of bed, then Shuya pulled the curtains open. *It’s still night, right?*

Shuya was pointing out the window as he exclaimed, “It’s completely different today! There has never been so many of them before!”

“...Huh?”

Before me, droves upon droves of blobby...*things* floated in the air. *What are those things, you ask? It’s, well, those. I saw something similar before... That’s right, inside haunted houses.*

“W-Wow, so I’m still dreaming, huh? Okay, Shuya, good night. I’m gonna sleep now.”

“Denning! *Wake up already!*” He smacked me loudly on the cheek.

“O-Oiiiink!”

The scene was so surreal that I nearly went weak in the knees. I had never seen something like this before. This didn’t seem like Kirsch at all. It was almost as if someone had moved the campus into another world.



“It’s the arisen!” Shuya yelled. “At night, those things take over the entire school!”

The mysterious life-forms I had seen inside the dungeon were swarming around the campus of Kirsch Mage Institute, and they were *everywhere*.

Chapter 5: The Night of the Arisen

“How is this...real?” I muttered deliriously.

I knew that the monsters called the arisen existed in this world. These paranormal beings would wander into human civilizations from time to time, putting resident humans into comas. I had seen these creatures recently... *Right, when I confined myself into that dark cave inside that dungeon with Prince Neon.* We had gone there to monitor Shuya, and it was there that we had encountered the arisen.

“I reacted the exact same way at first. This is unbelievable, right?”

“H-Huh. It’s pretty rare for arisen to gather at places with such a high population,” I stammered, pretending I wasn’t affected at all.

In reality, though, I was shocked out of my mind. Like fish in an ocean, hundreds of thousands of arisen drifted around in the air, hanging like a shroud over the entire campus. *Is this an aquarium for arisen or something? Actually, this is a dream, right?*

I pinched my own cheeks. The stinging told me the answer. *Ah. I’m...not dreaming.*

“Excuse me?! Do you have no sense of urgency?! The school’s being taken over by these things!”

“C-Calm down, Shuya. A-Arisen are harmless monsters, at least to humans.”

“Don’t waste time by trying to deny reality, Denning! Remember what Professor Arle taught in class?! This is the Night of the Arisen! We’ve been under their spell the whole time!”

I didn’t need *him* to tell me that, but I was still trying to regain my composure. When arisen unleashed their powers, they would glow faintly in the darkness, which was what we called the Night of the Arisen. The ones under their influence would slumber away in bliss, and nobody would wake until the sun rose, or at least, that was what the records said. In areas where the arisen grew to abnormal numbers, there were even cases where humans would be asleep for several days.

“Shuya, how in the world did you discover them?”

He tore at his hair. “Ugh, where do I even start...? A-At any rate! I don’t really know why, but apparently, I have a natural resistance to the influence of arisen! That’s what they said!”

“They?”

“That idiotic prince, of course! More importantly! You were pretty good friends with that prince, right? In that case, surely you know

where they are right now!”

Shuya grabbed my shoulders and implored me for an answer. *Wait, hey, ow. Your grip's too tight, owwww! I only just woke up, I'll have you know!*

“What does Prince Neon have anything to do with this?!”

“Like I said, that’s because...! How do I even explain this?! Okay, so here’s the deal. That prince is causing the Night of the Arisen, and he’s been fighting with those creatures while we’re asleep! Which *means* that this is a trial for him to overcome so that he can gain freedom from the Dustour Empire!”

“...What?”

I knew he was pretty desperate right now, but I really had no idea what he was saying. *Sorry, Shuya.*

Two kids sprinted across campus in the dead of night while the rest of the school slept. Those two kids? Yeah, Shuya and I.

“You moron!” I screamed. “Why didn’t you tell anyone about such a huge issue?!”

Under the silvery paint of the moonlight, the clouds slowly drifted across the sky. Silence draped the entire campus, making everything so still that I could’ve sworn time had stopped.

Some arisen descended to the ground, and I felt a bone-deep chill whenever they passed through me. That eerie sensation made me blow up on Shuya, who had taken the weight of it all upon his own shoulders, since I had no one else to take it out on.

“I... That’s because the prince asked me to keep quiet about this!”

“Why did you tell *me*, then?!”

“I mean... You two are pretty close, right?! You’re about the only person at Kirsch who can talk to the prince like equals!”

Did he just say I'm close with that prince? Well, I guess I haven't heard anything about that prince making any friends since he came to Kirsch, so I'm the next best thing, but...

I let out a long exhale. “Let’s talk about more pressing things. Are you sure that those monsters won’t attack us?”

The only life-forms that moved around in this hibernating school other than us two were *those* creatures. Monsters of the night were pacing about the campus, mostly wolves and evil spirits. Saliva dripped from their mouths as they stared at us with glowing eyes. However, for some strange reason, they had no intention of attacking us at all. They only observed. Earlier, I had reached towards my wand, thinking that I should take them down before they turned on us, but Shuya had stopped me.

According to Shuya, these creatures wouldn’t assault us unless we attacked them first. A wolf was sniffing the tidy flowers and plants,

and its sharp fangs glinted under the moonlight. Frankly, I had a lot of doubts about his claim.

“Those guys come onto the campus from the forest once the Night of the Arisen begins. Their target is the prince; they have no interest in anyone else. I saw them attacking the prince many, many times.”

“I...see.” I had a headache. *I can't believe that behind all the normalcy, a big incident was going on at night that I was completely oblivious to.* “Shuya, don't tell me that Prince Neon chose Kirsch as his study abroad destination because...”

“Because the black dragon rests here, it attracts arisen. Apparently, that works out in his favor. He mentioned that the life force of an ancient being is a natural lure for arisen.”

I sighed. “Damn it. You should have told me earlier. This is way too much for you to deal with alone.”

“Didn't I just say that the prince stopped me from doing that?! He swore that he definitely wouldn't cause any trouble, and he asked me to keep quiet about it! And you can't blame me too much! I saw his retainer fighting with the monsters, and I thought she was strong enough to handle it!”

I can't believe this. So our dear protagonist has apparently heard it all directly from Prince Neon inside this world of dreams, and he learned secrets that even I didn't know about! I didn't have the first clue that these two were connected in such a way. I guess this calls for praise for the great anime protagonist.

“Okay, so, to sum it up—Shuya, you woke up alone during a Night of the Arisen, and Prince Neon spoke to you directly and told you his true reason for coming to the south. Then, he begged you to stay silent. In other words, he took advantage of the fact that you're a massive softie.”

“I-I'm not a softie at all...!” he protested.

“Are you for real? Well, if you weren't aware, let me tell you right now—you're a softie with no boundaries.”

But...now I get why Prince Neon was so obsessed with this guy.

Prince Neon had kept tabs on Shuya for the longest time. In the dungeon, he had always been thinking about what choices Shuya would make when faced with adversity. *Was that because Shuya might wake up on a Night of the Arisen? Did he want to see whether Shuya would get in his way when that happens? I bet that's the case.*

In the end, this guy didn't obstruct the prince, from the looks of things. The prince was probably trying to figure out whether he could use Shuya's naivety as leverage—whether he could make Shuya keep quiet about the fact that monsters were infiltrating the campus. Looking at the results, he had great success. After all, Shuya didn't spill the beans until things came to this point.

“But wow... I would’ve never guessed that Prince Neon was planning on abandoning the empire.”

Our resident international student had come south so that he could escape to a faraway land. He always wore a whimsical smirk on his face, as if nothing could shackle him down, but... *What was he actually thinking behind that mask?*

I turned to face Shuya. “I’m surprised, though. He told you to tell no one, but you actually had it in you to speak up now.”

“That’s...well... My crystal ball suggested that I should tell you. Ah, hey, don’t look so murderous! I left it behind in my room! I was determined to never carry it with me during fights!”

“...All right.”

I had insisted that Shuya stay away from the Great Spirit of Fire, but now, I felt oddly grateful for his presence. If not for that Great Spirit, I would probably still be in the dark right now.

I continued. “It’s kind of strange to think that you kept quiet until the situation pressed you to do otherwise. You’re the type of guy who would never let Prince Neon off the hook for dragging Kirsch into this.”

“I, well... That prince *bowed* to me when he asked me to stay out of it, you know? I never thought that he’d have such a cornered look on his face, and...”

“To put it simply... He took advantage of your kindness, huh? After all, you’re such a big softie...”

I left him to pout while he hung his head. In my mind, I organized all the information I had gotten.

Prince Neon’s goal was to gain freedom from the empire. He had come to the south to get away from his homeland under the guise of studying abroad. If he could fully evade all the assassins from the empire, Dustour would acknowledge his freedom, or at least that was the agreement he had made. Then, the prince had chosen Kirsch Mage Institute to be the stage for his battlefield, since this place was apparently a beacon for arisen.

Here, I let out a sigh inwardly. *The problem, however, is the guy he made this pact with—his father, the emperor of the Dustour Empire, who is nicknamed the Emperor of Conquest.* Everyone often saw Nanatrij as the only looming threat of Dustour, but that wasn’t true. The Emperor of Conquest was the man who had expanded Dustour’s territory this rapidly.

I frowned. “Hey, Shuya, there’s one thing I don’t really get.”

The swarm of arisen was still swimming around languidly in the night sky. They didn’t have their own will, as they were nothing more than lingering attachments. Was it even possible for the prince to incite a Night of the Arisen at his whim so conveniently after his

arrival?

I continued, "Even if Kirsch is like a lure for arisen right now, they can't have such good timing—"

"About that... You know the retainer who's always with him? That girl is, well..." The ever-present cheeriness on his face vanished immediately. His attitude was a complete change from earlier, when he had rushed to explain Prince Neon's actions to me, and he dragged his feet about finishing his sentence. "You might not know, but that idiotic prince's retainer is actually—"

"If you're talking about how she's not human, I already know, so save your breath and get to the point."

"Wha... *Whaaat*?! You knew?!"

"Are you trying to imply that she can control the arisen?"

"Well, I've seen her talking to the arisen once..."

Djinn were mysterious monsters. Unlike zombies and vampires, there were minuscule records of their behavior and ecology. What we knew was that they could reap lives without direct contact and that they were sometimes called the envoys of Thanatos because of that power. Djinn could perform countless feats that would seem impossible for any other creature, and to be honest, I could easily believe that she could do something ridiculous like control the arisen. She defied all common sense, after all.

Shuya called out to me. "Ah, whatever. After we make a turn at the next lecture building, we'll arrive at the crematory!"

A few days ago, on the rooftop, Prince Neon had told me to go find him at a certain place if I had business with him. And that had been the crematorium, the purpose of which was to dispose of animals and dangerous drugs at Kirsch.

The building itself sat on its lonesome in a grassy field that everyone shied away from. I had heard that the ashes from the numerous corpses of monsters had been buried under the soil around it.

"We've hit the jackpot..." I muttered. "It's hard to believe that we can see the arisen so clearly here."

One fact made this area stand out like a sore thumb compared to the rest of the campus, and that was the abundance of arisen in the sky. They swam in a circle, and at the center was the crematorium. If we added the arisen scattered across the school—I shuddered to even think about how many of them were around.

But there was more. If I looked down from the ghastly sky, corpses of monsters littered the ground. *He mentioned that the monsters only target Prince Neon, which means that the man is—*

There was a yell that dragged me out of my thoughts. "Prince

Neon! Since when have you started bringing in vampires to this school?!"

It was filled with rage, and was accusing like a dagger aiming to strike.

Turning to the source of the commotion, I saw two figures in the waist-high grass. *Claude* was pointing his sword at Prince Neon. I nearly fell over from shock.

You could cut the tension with a knife. Below the sky full of twinkling stars, Claude held his sword at Prince Neon's neck. The prince, meanwhile, sat crouched down on the ground.

"Stop right there, Claude! Do you know who you're pointing your weapon at?!" I screamed.

"You have also awoken, Young Master! Please stay away for now! This prince has lured monsters into this school the whole time...!"

"Sir Claude... I have already informed you about my actions and goals inside this world of dreams," the prince said in a clipped voice. "And your warning may be for naught. It seems the redhead next to him has told him everything he needs to know."

I nodded. "Yeah, Shuya told me. Claude, lower your sword."

Claude looked so enraged that he could slit the prince's throat at a moment's notice. I wasn't exaggerating, and I needed to stop him at once, but I couldn't stop my mind from wandering to something else that bugged me. This place seemed uncomfortably familiar to me—because I had just seen it in my dream.

My most precious girl had been killed here. Violent fury had washed over me like a storm, and I had planned on hunting down *every last one* of those damned creatures in the sky.

"...Oi...D-Denning, look at th-that... There's someone on the ground there. Is that... No way... She easily dealt with the vampires yesterday, so how could this happen?!"

Shuya's voice was faint in my ears, almost as if he was talking underwater. The girl lying there truly was *her*, the retainer who had always accompanied her prince. Like a reenactment of my dream, that girl lay limply on the ground.

I clenched my jaw. "Prince Neon, there are so many things I want to say to you right now, but we need to heal her first!"

His reply was like a bucket of ice water. "They pierced her core. It is too late."

The girl groaned in pain, and the prince knelt next to her. The only thing I could do was watch her over the prince's shoulder. I noticed the hole in her chest, and in my mind, my rational voice told me she was beyond saving.

We hadn't been close, the two of us. *So why does my heart feel like it's being torn apart?* Ominous thoughts flashed through my mind like a

kaleidoscope, not allowing gaps for anything else.

On very rare occasions, arisen would mix up the dreams and memories of two people nearby. Their powers blurred the line between dreams and reality.

Claude pressed Prince Neon for answers, but there was no reply. Prince Neon's back seemed to exude a mix of haunting sorrow and grief. To be blunt, he looked like a different person compared to how he usually acted. He looked as if the arisen had sucked out his very soul, strength and all.

I took a deep breath. Somebody had to be the voice of reason here. And I felt like it was my job to take on that role, which was why I began talking to the prince who would soon lose his retainer.

"Prince Neon," I said carefully, "I have heard about your circumstances from Shuya. I have finally learned about your true plans." After a pause, I continued, "Now I understand why you were so obsessed with Shuya."

The prince, who had fixed his gaze on his fallen retainer alone until now, reacted slightly. "Shuya Newkern, huh? I assumed that you would not tell a single soul, but my intuition has failed me. It does not matter anyway. It is already over," he whispered in a hoarse voice.

Then, for the first time, he turned to look at us. "Piggy Duke, there is no point hiding it anymore. Suz and I planned on abandoning our nation. Do you remember what I told you before? Everything I have done was for the sake of surviving together with Suz. Every single day counted."

He looked utterly exhausted, worn out like a rag that had been used for too long, and like a man that had lost all of his gambles against fate. Prince Neon had always seemed like he was in full control, as if nothing could faze him—as if he was some divine, untouchable entity.

I had thought that perhaps he just had to be unmoving like a mountain to survive the crushing weight of being a prince in that overly powerful nation. But that had been a silly delusion on my part, and now, it was cracking as it fell apart into dust.

"Prince Neon, I saw the monsters gathered on the campus earlier. From the ones I could make out, at least, none of them could deal her such a fatal blow."

His retainer, Suz, had remarkable abilities. More than remarkable. Shuya couldn't even compare with her, at least not as he currently was. Yet, here she now stood on the precipice of death.

My voice turned grave. "Who in the world did this to her?"

The answer, however, came in the form of an unknown voice. "I did."

I hurriedly scanned the surroundings, but could not find the

source. *Surely the wolves staring at us didn't just talk, right?* But no matter how carefully I scoured the environment, the only thing I could see were the corpses of monsters.

"Silly little thing. Not there. Look up."

Without thinking, I craned my neck to look upwards to where the voice came from. And there, surrounded by the ocean of night filled with arisen, was a creature of the darkness—a vampire, a natural enemy of humans.

"Good evening, humans of the south."

Not just one vampire, but an entire pack of them. Countless vampires silhouetted by the light of the shining full moon. Creatures that had been at odds with humans throughout all of history.

The one who had addressed us had a childlike appearance.

"Don't move, Shuya," I muttered slowly.

Shuya had made a move on instinct, attempting to cast a spell in their direction, but I had grabbed his arm before he could do anything. He nodded with a solemn look on his face. As an adventurer, he was probably very much aware of how tight of a corner we'd gotten ourselves into.

I had never seen so many vampires gathered in one place before, to say nothing of how a significant number of them had golden eyes. Vampires with red eyes were pretty common in the south, but the more powerful individuals had eyes of melted gold. In fact, the guild master of Zenelaus, the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, had defeated one of these gold-eyed vampires. That was a big part of what made him such a celebrated hero.

"What a shame. If you'd attacked us, I was planning on taking all of you out together with that little prince." His eyes narrowed. "A smart move."

But now not one, not two, but an entire swarm of vampires with golden eyes were present. There was even a vampire who had a stature that completely went against their usual description, and he was clearly different from the rest. His eyes also glowed like amber, but were dark like an inky abyss.

"Oualdi. I should've given you more than enough time, but are these weaklings the only servants you managed to come up with?"

The boy with an androgynous, ethereal feel to him turned to the amber-eyed vampire with a towering frame. The vampires drifting in silence around them all bowed deferentially towards the one that had called out to us. They were prideful creatures, so how could they be cowering in front of such a tiny one? It made no sense.

The towering vampire, Oualdi, replied, "My deepest apologies, Lord Giabalham. The monsters inside the forest were nowhere close to our standards, and convincing our brethren in the south to join our

folds took quite a significant amount of time...”

I could feel a dominating presence from the towering vampire they called Oualdi. He was definitely a cut above the rest. With his level of abilities, it was bizarre that he chose to be servile towards another vampire, but their exchange was solid proof. Even *he* was in awe of the tiny vampire.

“Oualdi, even if they’re our brethren, these things are no good. Some of them seem to be of a respectable age, but their eyes are still red, and they won’t even serve as distractions against a djinn. If I didn’t come around, you would’ve allowed the pwince to slip right from your grasp, wouldn’t you?”

That young vampire, with golden hair and clear eyes that reminded me of a black diamond, maintained total control over the situation. With delicate features and a frame so fragile that he looked as if he could snap like a flower, he could’ve probably disguised himself as a human and fit right in if he wanted to.

However, I could not let myself be deceived by those looks—that boy was the personification of a vile, horrifying darkness. Even a mage of my caliber felt primal fear towards the boy. My fear wasn’t towards the countless vampires that filled my vision—it aimed squarely at him.



After a pause, the bigger vampire said humbly, “I cannot ever thank you enough for your aid. Now that the trickiest opponent, the djinn, is on the verge of death, please allow us to take over from here, my Lord.”

“Sure, I don’t really mind. It’s not every day that I get to stab the core of a djinn. For the first time in a long time, I had to concentrate as hard as I could.” He shrugged. “In any case, Prince Neon.”

After the blond vampire addressed the prince, Prince Neon looked up for the first time. The whirlpool of sorrow around the prince transformed into something completely different—bloodlust, like nothing I had ever felt before. It was so strong that I had the urge to leave this area immediately.

The vampire continued, unaffected, “Hey, why the glare? Did I do anything bad? Oh, are you angwy that I attacked the djinn over there? In that case, you’re barking up the wrong tree. I have followed the rule that we won’t dwag in the innocent bystanders there.”

Then, in a voice trembling with a rage as hot as if coals had scorched his entire body, Prince Neon directed his words towards the vampire in the air. “Giabalham, our battle only commences once the Night of the Arisen has begun. However, you aimed your attack precisely during Suz’s most vulnerable moment—the moment she unleashes the power of the arisen.”

“I haven’t bwoken any pwomises. I made sure to aim that djinn the moment it used its powers on the arisen, after all. See? The Night of the Arisen *has* fallen! If I attacked it before it released its power, the scenery would’ve been different. Also, that djinn should’ve known that it’d be completely defenseless during that brief moment, so it was very calculated. You should actually praise me for making such a successful attack from such a high altitude!”

“...You damned snake.”

“But I’m glad I made it just in time before you managed to slip away. You’re absolutely amazing, Monster Tamer Neon Dustour. That strongest pet of yours just might be a bit too much for Oualdi, you see, which is why I came to deal with it personally. So, little pwince, are those people your comrades?”

“They have nothing to do with this. Do not attack them, Giabalham.”

Vampires were tricky monsters that adventurers avoided as much as they could. In fact, adventurers were advised to flee on sight if they ever encountered a vampire in a dungeon.

Shuya was the one who made the most obvious reaction towards these creatures. “No way... Giabalham, the Northern King of the Underworld...? Why the hell is he in the south...?” His face drained of

color, and his teeth chattered.

I had also realized the identity of that boy when the burly vampire had called that name—Giabalham. I had trouble believing that such a child was that infamous vampire whom all adventurers knew of, because he was just that special. Normal vampires, who were considered subpar and fledglings among their race, had red eyes. Higher vampires, who were independent and were respected for their power, had golden eyes. Then, vampires that transcended the limits of their race were said to have eyes of black.

“Claude... Stay right there. Don’t move,” I commanded.

Claude nodded without a sound.

This was crazy. The King of the Underworld rarely ever left his ice castle, but he had traveled to the south as an assassin out for Prince Neon’s life. For the past few centuries, the Adventurers’ Guild in the north had placed countless bounties on this monster’s head, but he had mowed down all the adventurers that had dared make an attempt on his life. Now, there was even a ban on attacking or even approaching this legendary vampire, and whoever took him down would be promoted to S-class on the spot.

And well, thankfully, Giabalham isn’t paying us any heed, I thought, frustrated.

“Now then, little prince,” the vampire said merrily, “you’re completely powerless without the djinn you placed your bets on. How about you stop being so stubborn and go home? You were *waaay* too naive. Leave the locals out of it. ‘Fight only during the Night of the Arisen.’ Tsk tsk. Much too trusting. I guess if you have a monster with an extraordinary power like a djinn, even the infamous royalty of Dustour would let it get to their head! Or did you let your guard down because your dream was a hair’s breadth away from coming true?”

“...I will *kill* you,” Prince Neon hissed.

Giabalham chortled, then continued to taunt the prince. “Aww, I’m *sooo* scared. But how about you admit your defeat already? The monster that was your pride and joy is going to die soon, and you left all the other monsters in your inventory back in the north, right? What can you do *now*, hm?”

I tried to piece things together from the little evidence I’d gathered. So, apparently, as a djinn, Suz had unleashed the powers of the arisen every night, causing the Night of the Arisen. Through this, they’d forced everyone at Kirsch to fall into a deep slumber, and while we’d all been unaware, the prince and Suz would have their nightly clashes with the vampires. *That is, until Giabalham took down Suz through underhanded means...*

“I will kill you, Gia, no matter what it takes.”

“And I’m asking, little pwince, *how?*”

In that instant, the prince, who had been behind us during the conversation, walked forward and passed us. He was the very picture of bloodlust, and every single part of Prince Neon's soul and body was focused solely on that vampire.

"Like this. Die."

The prince's wand pointed towards Giabalham. Not a beat later, the vampire with black eyes pointed his index finger in our direction. A group of vampires located in the furthest corner away from Giabalham wedged themselves between the prince and Giabalham with an eerie movement. This technique to instantaneously move from one place to another was the reason that the vampires were known as the Rulers of Night—they could slip around inside the shadows.

One of the vampires who had appeared out of nowhere, blocking the prince's wand, fell from the sky. Having been attacked by an unknown force, the vampires seemed shaken, but the grin plastered on the Vampire King's face didn't shift at all. *That guy... He used one of his comrades as a meat shield!*

"Oualdi, you were right. The vampires of the south are weaklings. Pretty much all of them have red eyes, and they couldn't even put up a fight against the prince's powers."

"Lord Giabalham, these vampires are worthless pawns that can be sacrificed at our convenience. I have never counted them as an asset."

The boy chuckled. "Oh, how horrible you are! But I must say, all of you are rather pathetic. We are meant to be beings of pride, and yet, my bwethren aren't even voicing one complaint! You must have taught them a painful lesson."

"I believe it was painful enough, for I have eradicated half of their clans. And now, my Lord, with the djinn eliminated from the fray, it is within our capabilities to bring the prince back to the north. Please do as you wish."

"Hmm, you're right. What should I do, then?"

Prince Neon gritted his teeth, then raised his voice and roared towards the sky. "Are you *running away*, Gia?!"

"Running away? Hah, that's a very funny joke. In that case, Oualdi, I'm going to play with the little pwince now, so dealing the last blow to that djinn is your job."

After a pause, the bigger vampire asked, "What shall we do with those local humans? They have discovered us."

"If they try rising against you, go ahead and kill them."

The giant, Oualdi, looked at us. Shuya took a step back, and I could hear Claude tightening his grip on his sword.

That exchange had signaled the start of the assault on the monsters.

"D-Denning! What're we even supposed to do?! The monsters just

keep coming and coming! Where the hell did these things hide?!”

Wolves weren't the only ones on the list—walking skeletons and corpses emerged too. Earlier, that giant vampire had said that he'd spent a lot of time gathering servants. *They're probably the pitiful remains of the animals that inhabited the forest. Mere shadows of their former selves.*

“Servants of vampires can slip into the darkness! That's where they're hiding! And now we know why Professor Loco Moco grumbled that he couldn't find monsters inside the forest! Those vampires turned them into servants!”

The servants that deferred to the rulers of night made their assault, appearing out of nowhere. One of the vampires' most fearsome traits was their ability to turn other creatures into powerful servants. In exchange for the gift of strength, vampires would gain total control over their chosen subjects.

As I listened to Shuya's strained voice shouting in the background, I tackled a bat that was trying to strike us from above. I grabbed it by the neck before anything could happen, and snapped it forcefully before shouting, “Claude, these guys are aiming for the prince! Buy us some time! Shuya, you go hide somewhere!”

“How could I hide in a situation like this?! I-I'll fight too!” Shuya yelled.

Almost as an instantaneous response to my command, Claude's sword flared up. The swords of Denning's knights were of a special make, forged to protect the people and enchanted with several spells. The element Claude had chosen was fire. Seeing the light of the flames startled even the vampires in the sky.

However, I didn't know how much time that would buy us. I yelled, “Prince Neon! You—”

“I shall not offer words of apology, for there is no point now. But you can trust me on one thing—I will personally deal with the aftermath of my actions.” The prince held his wand in a tight grip.

I had only just realized that I had never seen the prince fight for real before. He probably wasn't weak, because he would've long been weeded out from this world during the bloody battle for the throne.

Then, it had happened in the blink of an eye.

Prince Neon pointed his wand towards us. “I shall deal with the most pressing matter first. All of you, sleep.”

He waved his wand simply, as if he was only casting a basic spell. The magic around the prince *warped*. An extraordinary torrent of power gushed forth. My head was light, and next to me, Shuya collapsed onto the ground. Though Shuya had been the one most fired up about saving the school from this crisis, he fell asleep in an instant, unable to put up any resistance.

Fast. How could he be this fast? “Your Highness, is your power possibly...!”

His ruby eyes gleamed gold, shining with a spectral glow. Mana in the color of melting gold gathered around his right hand. “My words hold power. When I was young and inexperienced, I held little control over it, and many saw me as a risk. I can only use it in the form of basic commands like this, but it is a force to behold. And...you did not betray my expectations, Piggy Duke. You were able to resist it completely.”

The prince could turn his own words into magic. He skipped the incantation that one would normally need, instead merging the power of the spirits with his voice. The principle was simple, but the results were astounding.

Claude fell onto his knees, likely under the attack of a potent drowsiness. His sword clattered onto the ground.

The prince issued his next ‘command.’ “Do not move.”

The servants of the vampires, which had been ready to pounce on us, stilled immediately with those words. *That’s an absurd ability. So...this is what the prince truly is like without any masks.*

The man who had found more joy in his school life than everyone here, the man who had a free spirit that couldn’t be chained down, was nowhere to be found. He forcefully poured all his bloodlust and malice into his power until it was screeching with strain, and his glare was glued to the spot where he had last seen the vampire.

“Piggy Duke. If you behave, you and your companions will not be harmed.”

“Your Highness, what are you going to—”

“I am going to kill Gia. What else?”

“Please wait... I have so much I want to ask you.”

“I do not have time, unfortunately.”

“How could you say that when you’re the one who dragged me right into the center of this mess?”

“I am short on time. Only one.”

He must have known that he would be walking onto a path of thorns when he had decided to flee from his own country as a prince, and though I respected that, turning Kirsch into the stage for his battlefield was an unforgivable act. And, more than anything...

“Are you planning on abandoning your retainer here in that state?”

She was still here, her core crushed, continuously coughing up blood.

The prince looked at his retainer. She was breathing—alive. *And he’s just going to leave her there?*

The girl seemed to have regained her consciousness somewhat,

and on instinct, I moved to cast a *Heal* on her, but I stopped myself. To djinn, our *Heal* would only do harm. She was so far gone that she couldn't even moan out in pain anymore.

"Her core, the djinn equivalent of a heart, was destroyed by Gia. And...we have already bidden our last farewell."

"But she's *alive*."

"Slowe Denning. There is...no need. Enough."

His gaze weighed on me like a boulder. Though there wasn't any magic behind those eyes, I couldn't stop myself from flinching. A tremor began spreading throughout my body.

He was a prince and held himself with all the dignity of one, somehow managing to maintain it despite being hopelessly surrounded by enemies. It would've been impossible for anyone else in his shoes, and that was likely proof that he had overcome many brushes with death in his past. And...that she had probably been with him every single time.

"Listen, you vile servants of Gia! I shall send everyone who stands in my way into the embrace of death!"

The servants of the darkness, including the vampires, were clearly cowering, apprehensive of the prince's reality-defying ability. His very words were spells in themselves, commands which forced his targets to obey.

However, I also couldn't help but think about it from another angle. Perhaps one couldn't survive the trials of the merciless Dustour Empire unless they had a power that bent the rules to their every whim.

As soon as he finished his sentence, Prince Neon kicked the ground hard and shot up into the air at an incredible speed. It was hard to believe that the same man had been crushed by sorrow only moments ago at the looming death of his retainer.

I chewed hard on my lip, feeling powerless. The prince had tossed away *everything* he had and completely severed ties with his country, just so he could have a life with the one person who truly mattered to him.

Being with her, staying by her side should've been the most important thing right now, but I had failed to stop him. At the same time... I couldn't blame him for making such a decision.

"Young Master! Why did you let Prince Neon go?!"

"Oi, you're barking up the wrong tree here!"

After Prince Neon's departure, the servants of the darkness withdrew and paced around us in circles, watching us warily. They were probably trying to judge whether we would take Prince Neon's side again and become their enemy. The prince had been right—the monsters wouldn't attack us unless we made a move first.

But the problem was that vampire Oualdi with his impressive physique up there in the sky—the vampire that had received the order to finish Suz once and for all from the Vampire King.

“Young Master, I came to these lands as Prince Neon’s guard. I have yet to perform any of my duties... Even if I cannot even move a hair on Gia, I—”

Claude was likely fuming. The one he ought to protect had woven a web of deception, one he had been kept in the dark about the entire time. Now, he finally had the chance to do what he had come to Kirsch to do. He gripped his sword.

However.

“Don’t go, Claude. There’s something else I want you to do.”

“Curse these things! They just started attacking outta nowhere! I guess their instincts or something are telling them that I’m the prince’s ally, huh?!”

Finding the prince’s trail had been easy. I only had to look for the corpses of vampire servants dotted around on the ground. It was practically a giant signpost saying, “Prince Neon Was Here.” There were no superficial wounds on the monsters, but they were still dead as doorknobs. *His power truly is impressive...* I had fought with many powerful opponents in the past, but the prince was definitely a cut above the rest.

After I made it through the grassy fields, the lecture building and well-maintained paths filled my vision—a familiar, everyday scene from my school life. But as I marched forward, the monsters that pounced on me also grew increasingly dangerous.

“Southern mage, if you want to go any further, you’ll have to get through me.”

A vampire stood there with his arms crossed, and he had brought a swarm of zombies with him. His eyes were red—one of the vampires that Giabalham had mocked, and probably one of the vampires from the south that that big Oualdi had forced to join the battle.

“Hey! Don’t you dare ignore me!” he yapped.

Among all the vampires that had drifted in the air earlier, he seemed to be the youngest, based on his concerned expression.

I would show him no mercy if he wished to interfere. But at the same time... He seemed so frightened of something that he looked pitiful in my eyes.

“Out of my way, Red Eyes. No matter how hard you try, I don’t think those vampires from the north will ever acknowledge you, you know?”

“Shut up, mage,” he hissed. “You don’t even know a thing about

how dreadful Lord Giabalham and Lord Oualdi can be.”

The vampire melted into the darkness, and a bluish-white flame sprung into life inside the curtain of night. Spells manifested around the azure flame and soared my way. The vampire probably cast these using his own blood as a medium. If I had more time to loiter around, I would’ve loved to stay and observe, but I urgently needed to find Prince Neon.

“I can sense your presence leaking out from the darkness, vampire. Are you *that* scared of those golden-eyed creatures in the sky?”

“Shut your mouth!!!”

He may have only been red-eyed, but he was still a vampire, a monster that veteran adventurers risked their lives to eliminate. I couldn’t face this opponent recklessly.

But I had to deal with them all in one sweep and catch up to the prince. I *had* to.

The other vampires began stirring.

“He’s useless against that mage! We need to help him!”

“If that mage interferes with Lord Giabalham’s battle, our heads will be the next ones rolling!”

Prince Neon had come to the south knowing that he might be running right towards death. From what little I had heard from Shuya, the prince had massacred swarms upon swarms of assassins on his way to Kirsch, and that was why the empire had to resort to sending hunters as strong as vampires to the south. And in the end, even the Vampire King had been dispatched... Yet, the prince had always sported a grin on his face whenever I saw him at school.

A vampire with golden eyes clicked his tongue. “Tsk, the vampires of the south are such lowly creatures. Trash who can only cower and live in hiding from the humans. I suppose I expected such an outcome, but to think that they were defeated by a mere mage... They bring shame upon our race.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Look what we have here. Goldie-eyes this time. You look pretty confident in your own abilities, but to me, there isn’t much of a difference between the north and the south.”

“Move aside. We only have business with the prince.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

I swallowed my fear and took a step forward. Northern vampires didn’t have the pride that they did for no reason. The southern ones couldn’t even hold a candle to them in terms of ability. Each individual was a threat, and if even one of them showed up in a town, the Adventurers’ Guild would hold an all-out operation to eliminate it.

That wasn’t the end of the bad news either, because they were more rational than those of the south. Darkness magic wasn’t the only

element fully under their command—they could even use fire and water magic effectively. At this point, I had to make sacrifices and turn a blind eye to minor injuries, because I didn't have the leisure to stop and deal with them. The only task I should focus on was catching up to the prince.

And finally, I had pushed myself through the barricade with brute force and arrived at my destination—the large square in front of the cathedral.

This place was famous for being the site where a legend was born, where I took down the black dragon. And now, it was littered with piles of vampire corpses.

But...

“...Looks like I was too late, huh?”

The prince's success had only gone so far—I saw the Vampire King floating in the air, his arm skewered through Prince Neon.



“So this is the Night of the Arisen I only heard about in rumors... Rather atmospheric, I must say!”

A man sprinted under the cover of night, and his name was Claude. He desperately suppressed the urge to bemoan to the world about how terrible of a night it was and ran as quickly as his legs could take him.

When he craned his neck, he could see the vampires that dotted the night sky. “Those cretins are laughing! Ugh, I was aware that vampires were all malicious characters, but... What sickening creatures!”

Are they mocking me as a puny human who can only run on the ground? Claude wondered. But if that had been the case, it was strange that they only set servants without intelligence in Claude's direction one after another, instead of crushing him and the person on his back underneath their shoes.

On his back was Suz, the retainer of the man Claude should have protected. Feeling the weight of that guilt on his shoulders, Claude eliminated the hostile monsters in his path.

What a shame, then, that his pace was no different than a snail's.

“Looks like I cannot hope for reinforcements!”

“Impossible... The arisen are strong... Everyone's asleep...”

“You're very convincing, o great djinn who controls the arisen. In any case, do you think it's possible for me to make the journey to the young master's chambers?!”

“Definitely...not... You'll collapse...midway...”

“It seems that we share the same opinion. Why are those damned

vampires watching from a distance, by the way?”

“I killed a lot of their comrades... So they probably want revenge...”

“I see, so they wish to drag out your suffering and find joy in your torment! Hey, wolves, cease this constant moving at once! You are getting on my last nerve!”

One. Two. Three. One by one, he eliminated the monsters with a sweep of his sword, but the servants of darkness couldn't be deemed as small fry by any means. The blood of the vampires blessed these monsters with strength, and they were all equally ferocious. Claude's guess was that the magic of vampires fanned the flames of aggression in them. Even the most commonly seen species among the servants, wolves, would mow down an average student of Kirsch in an instant.

“Let me complain about something. You are too reserved, you and the prince both. I am his guard, but you never told me even a word about how you engage in battle every night! Don't be such a stranger. You'll make this old man really sad.”

“We decided that... We won't drag anyone from the south into it...”

“Oh, you are too kind. You'll make this old man cry at this rate. But... More importantly, are you really going to die? The bleeding seems to have stopped.”

“Djinn are different from humans. I can only speak right now because our deaths drag out much longer. I don't think I'll last until sunrise... But, Claude, I'm... I'm a monster. It's the first time someone has ever carried me on their back... Aren't you repulsed by that?”

“...Not really. It isn't a big deal.”

In his mind, Claude clicked his tongue in frustration. Her body was light, delicate, but she had fought vampires every single night. He was a disgrace as the prince's guard. He felt so ashamed that he wanted to die on the spot.

“Claude. Stop. They're coming down.”

In front of them, a vampire glided down from the air. Perhaps they had concluded that the wolves were getting nowhere and were finally budging from their comfortable spectator seats to move onto the stage.

Dozens of vampires dotted the sky. If they came down at full force, they could easily defeat Claude without so much as lifting a finger, especially since he had someone to protect. But they didn't, and Claude was inclined to believe the retainer's theory—the sadistic desire to toy with their prey and torment them as much as possible outweighed their desire to make this quick.

“In all my years, I've never once fought vampires until now. Suz,

the ones with red eyes are weaker among them, correct?"

"They're not exactly weak. They're still about as strong as you are."

"...Damn it," Claude swore. "The prince sure brought some awful nightmares along with him."

In a normal situation, it would take several average knights of the Country of Knights to defeat one vampire. They boasted supernatural strength, brutal dispositions, and high intellect. One couldn't afford to treat them as anything less than the abominations they were, red eyes or otherwise.

"That's bad news," Claude muttered.

"Yeah. Very bad news. I saw Oualdi up there earlier..."

"By Oualdi, you mean that vampire with golden eyes who's larger than everyone else?"

"He's a vampire, but he can use light magic... If you faced him, he'd probably wring off your neck before you could blink."

"If he can even enhance his body with light magic... Yeah, that does sound bad. But he's not as strong as that cocky blond vampire, Giabalham. Do I have that right?"

"Of course... That other vampire's so ancient that he'd even show up in historical archives. It's impossible to kill that thing."

"I see. Well, I suppose I'll leave the extraordinary one to the equally extraordinary young master. I guess this one's down to me."

"...Are you crazy? Do you have delusions of winning?"

"It's just that I have no plans of dying for naught."

Claude sucked in a deep breath. *I know it better than anyone—I'm mediocre.* Then, with a sigh, he muttered, "No matter how much experience I amass, I still feel faint-hearted during a moment like this, huh?"

For as long as he could remember, he'd been weak of will, only able to mindlessly—tactlessly—work harder and harder and harder. The commoner boy and the knights of House Denning had been overflowing with talent compared to him.

But somehow he hadn't given way under pressure. Even after knowing his pitiful limits, he still persisted, as if diligence was the only thing he had known.

"Claude...?"

That had been when Duke Denning had commanded him to be the young master's knight. At first, he had questioned it. *Why me?* he had thought. One look around the roster of knights under House Denning, and you would find plenty of knights with more talent and social standing. No matter how hard he'd thought about it, he couldn't pinpoint even a single aspect he had been superior to other knights.

"Don't worry, Suz. You won't die, nor will the prince. You have

me, and the prince has the young master.”

But now Claude had an idea. The duke must have noticed how foolish and full of envy Claude was.

Claude had been more mediocre than anyone else. Claude had been the most unfit to be by Slowe Denning’s side. But it was because there was such a gap between him and the Prodigy of Wind that Claude had been able to look his own foolishness square in the eye and confide in the young master about his error.

Claude continued, “When you’re as experienced in life as an old man like me, you’ll know it too. Everything will surely work out in the end.”

The girl on his back breathed out, tickling his neck. “What are you even rambling about...?”

“I came to this school to be Prince Neon’s guard. And in stories, the guards will always, without fail, only die after they successfully protect their master. Suz, don’t you read?”

“I’m a monster. I can’t read...”

“Then I recommend studying. You may be a monster, but if you want to continue living with your prince, it’s better if you know how to read a thing or two.”

“...I’ll do that if it makes Master Neon happy.”

Claude chewed hard on his lip. *Such impressive loyalty*, he thought. *Even when she’s on death’s door, her heart goes out to the prince.*

“In that case, get off. We’re going to put up an ugly struggle so that we can *survive*.”

One vampire had landed on the ground—his patience had run out while the servants stalled, only watching warily from a distance. He was but a Red Eye, but having backup boosted the morale of the others, and another slowly closed in. They seemed to have given up on a surprise attack from the air, instead choosing to fight directly.

The vampires with golden eyes stood leisurely in the heavens, which meant that they must have dispatched the southern vampires.

“We haven’t made any progress on our journey... I can’t believe I have to use this so early on.” Claude paused, then chanted, “*Thunder Sword*.”

A slight swing was the trigger. Pure light cut through the darkness of night, coiling around the long blade like a serpent of lightning. A hail of lightning rained down on a nearby vampire like the rage of heaven, giving them a death sentence as it dissolved them into the void of the darkness.

Thunder Sword was a trump card that could affect the outcome of a battle with every hit. The audience of vampires in the air seemed to exclaim in admiration. To them, it probably wasn’t dissimilar to

watching a dog perform a trick.

Suz crouched down onto the ground, staring at Claude, who let out a sigh of satisfaction. She couldn't help but ask, "Claude. Was that your full power?"

"Yeah! Pretty impressive, aren't I?" Claude replied, brimming with confidence.

His strike had only defeated a single vampire. Nothing more.

"Not really."

"I...didn't expect that response."

Claude looked crestfallen, and he hung his head in dejection. For some reason, it made Suz want to giggle.

"Whew. Ugh, I'm not young anymore. I can't believe that's the last of me."

He had already unleashed *Thunder Sword* five times. That was a record for Claude.

But he'd only managed to take down a few vampires. And, perhaps tired of the charade, a vampire descended from the sky. Unlike all the ones before him, his eyes gleamed with gold.

"...That's a direct subordinate of Oualdi," Suz warned.

"That means I've finally forced down one of those haughty spectators from the sky."

"Claude... You already have enough trouble with the southern vampires... You can't win."

"You probably don't know this, but I'm a man who has always surpassed my limits."

"...Big talk for someone who trembled when he saw Gia."

"Oh, don't bring that up. That's a painful blow to this delicate thirty-year-old heart. And wait, you noticed that?"

The northern vampires were the masterminds behind this foolish farce, and one of them, bigger than all the previous challengers, made its way towards Claude. Claude could feel it—he was a seasoned warrior. *How do I describe it? It feels like he's made of bottled lightning.*

Though this vampire could never even compare with the blond vampire, Claude's legs began to shake on instinct. He could also see Oualdi hovering above them.

The battle was far from over. But Claude made his stand, because he remembered the young master's words: at the end of this journey, he would find a certain something that could heal this girl.

"Claude, let's stop here, okay? You're already at your limit..."

Claude Mustahd was a veteran knight. But be that as it may, he could never dream of rivaling Slowe Denning or even Silva. He knew that better than anyone else. He'd long known how his abilities had come to be regarded as second-rate.

When he had seen the Vampire King of the North, he'd secretly quaked in his boots thinking that he could never win against that freak of nature. And yet...even this girl had seen through his cowardly self. He was shameful. So shameful that it brought tears to his eyes.

"I'm just average, you see. I was never even close to a genius. That's why I've always been envious, thinking, 'Why do people keep leaving me in the dust even though I'm trying so hard?'"

The vampire with golden eyes drew closer. By now, Claude had nearly exhausted all his power. He had to change his mindset, and to do that—Claude sheathed his sword.

He continued, "And that's why, in my foolishness, I made the blunder of getting ideas about that thing. Yet, His Grace acknowledged me as the young master's knight, and that probably was the turning point of my life."

"...What are you doing? How could a knight put away his weapon? Are you an idiot...?"

"Earlier, you asked whether I'd be repulsed at the idea of carrying a monster on my back. Allow me to explain why I'm not. To tell you the truth, I'm very familiar with monsters."

Suz couldn't understand what was coming out of Claude's mouth, or why he was acting this way.

Claude muttered, "Buddy, the young master gave you permission to unleash your full powers."

"...Claude?"

"Arise, Grim. When this is over, you can devour as much of the young master's mana as you want."

Who in the world was he talking to? Suz didn't know, and she rubbed at her eyes in disbelief as he drew out a sword.

An eye faded into view on the blade, and the sword slowly transformed.

"Heeeeeeey Claude! Ya sure took yer sweet time! Yer always so slow! If yer facing vamps, ya should've called on the awesome Grim from the start, ya know?! Riiight, *buuuddy*?!"

In this world, you could find outlandish monsters that were downright bizarre if you searched carefully enough. And Suz had known that there were certain types of wondrous monsters that could disguise themselves as just about anything imaginable. But the thought of a monster which could take on the guise of a *sword* had never once crossed her mind.

"Slooowe's mana! I want ta taste that first-rate *maaana*!"

And it was on this night, at this hour, that Suz finally had the answer to a question she had been puzzled about.

"So Claaaude! We're gonna kill them *aaaall*!"

Once, this man who had sworn to be Prince Neon's guard had

cleaved her hat. His sword had extended in an instant, and she hadn't been able to figure out the mechanism. And now, she knew.



"I'm astonished. Together with the Red Eyes, I also dispatched a few of Oualdi's direct subordinates. Who would have thought that a human with the power to bweak through that bawwicade so quickly would be lurking in such a remote mage school?"

Slowly, I breathed in and out. *It's okay. I can still fight. The vampires earlier were just small fry, the appetizer before the main. The real show's going to start now.*

That's...what I'd like to say, but the vampires of the north were all formidable opponents.

"Hmm. Oualdi only went off to deal the last blow to a dying djinn, but he's taking way too much time. Well, maybe he's indulging his bad habit of tormenting his prey again."

The problem was, I hadn't managed to fully put them out of commission either. I had been too invested in catching up to Prince Neon, so I had stopped at rendering most of them temporarily immobile. With enough time, they'd come back to join the battle. Making a vampire stay dead was a difficult task.

"Ah, you were looking for the pwince, right? Looks like you were a widdle late."

Giabalham tossed Prince Neon towards the ground. If I didn't interfere and let him complete his free fall, there would be dire consequences, so I used magic to decelerate him. But even during his descent, the prince glared hard at the vampire and spat, "Die."

"Okay, I will give you some credit—that power's pretty impressive, little pwince. But your curses don't come any close to killing him. That aside, how wonderful your friend has come for you."

Prince Neon's curses could kill a vampire in an instant, but it didn't make so much as a scratch on Giabalham. Blood gushed out of the prince's body as he collapsed onto the ground like a worn-out rag. If he managed to get back to his feet, that would be a miracle at this point.

Yet, though he needed urgent medical attention, the fire in his eyes burned bright. But he couldn't command his body to move, and after sending a look in my direction, he collapsed back on the ground, limp.

"I suppose I could pwaise the little pwince for trying and give him an award for his fighting spiwit. And, what about you? Do you want to fight me?"

I didn't offer a reply, gauging his reaction warily.

He continued, "You know, I can't deny that I'm intwigued. With

the knowledge of my identity, what kind of attack would a mage of the south make? I'm cuwious, so..."

Initially, I had planned on fighting alongside the prince. With his power, I'd assumed that we could fight at quite an advantage. But with the state he was in, the prince probably couldn't do anything.

Which meant that I had to do this alone.

The vampire, Giabalham, was calm, perhaps even relaxed. I wasn't surprised, considering how much he underestimated me. Prince Neon was out of the picture, and in his eyes, I was nothing but an ant. He was letting his guard down to the extreme.

He mused, "So, perhaps I'll let you make the first move, hm?"

That was why he could spout such words, as if I was a bug he could crush at his whim.

"In that case, I'll gladly take up that opportunity," I declared.

I'd fought all kinds of opponents before him. Not every battle had landed me a smooth and successful victory either. I'd been pathetic in some of those fights. But no matter what, I was satisfied with the way I had marched down the road of life, because I had one overwhelming advantage that had allowed me to get the jump on them, at least.

"No matter who it may be, they shall not make it bend or break."

And that was because I had known the abilities and battle strategies of all the people I had faced so far. Be it the mercenary at Kirsch, the knight in Yoram, the demon in Huzak, or even the musketeer in Zenelaus.

The enemy this time, however, was different. He was a monster who held absolute authority over his territory inside the north as the Vampire King. This was a game—a way to kill time for Giabalham, and I couldn't predict his next move.

"Try, if you so wish. But it will not sever, for I forbid it."

Thinking back, that had actually been the case the entire time, starting from the moment Prince Neon had appeared on the stage. I had no information at all about the two new characters in my life. Until now, I had always relied on my knowledge of the anime, and that had come back to bite me. That was why Shuya had gotten a lead, while I had been left in the dust.

"Firm, harden. Let it be a rigid, unbreakable shackle."

Though regrets popped up one after another in my mind, I had to put my reflection session aside for now. During my attempt to catch up to Prince Neon, one question had churned in my head the entire time: *What can I do right now?*

And now, I finally had an answer.

"O magic, become punishing fetters that will bind the darkness. Power of the holy ring, form the Four Halos and bind my foe!"

From the tip of my wand, faint light manifested and shot out, slowly forming glowing rings. They were around the right size to fit around a human's wrists and ankles.

The Four Halos was a light spell that restricted the movements of a creature of darkness with a sacred light. The four rings of light bound the wrists and ankles of that vampire, and Giabalham let them restrain him as he stared at the spell, fascinated.

"A spell of Lectrikuhl, the Gweat Spirit of Light, hm? Well, this is the Countwy of Knights that's blessed by that spiwit, after all. I never thought I'd expewience being under the influence of that Great Spiwit's power... You fight completely opposite from the pwince."

Indeed, this was a spell that Lectrikuhl had crafted. The Vampire King grinned with childlike innocence, and he tried to rip his body out from the magical shackles with brute force. The rings of light, however, did not budge.

He blinked. "Huh? Wait, are you spending a lot of mana on a spell like this? Interesting... Are you planning on keeping me in place until dawn, when the bane of vampires will rise?"

Vampires couldn't walk in sunlight. That superstition hadn't changed throughout the centuries, and perhaps it would be surprising to some when they learned that it was true.

Someone hollered, "Lord Giabalham's trapped! Kill the human immediately!"

The northern vampires I had knocked down on my way to Prince Neon seemed to have arrived on the scene while I had been distracted. They were downright murderous towards me, the one who was binding Giabalham with a spell, but the "prisoner" was the one who stopped them.

Giabalham was entertained by his match with me. "Don't come over, any of you. This is quite a rare experience, and you'd kill my fun. It's been so long since I last encountered a spell I couldn't bweak with my own stwength."

Normally, *The Four Halos* was a spell that only an exceptional mage could cast with the aid of magic items that would burn a hole in their wallet. It could even stop a colossal dragon in its tracks.

Then, Giabalham's expression turned puzzled. "But there's one thing I don't get. Why do you put so much on the line for Pwince Neon? Even in Dustour, no one was willing to wisk their life for the pwince, you know."

Silence.

He raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe, that's just because you're ignorant. How about I inform you, then? The little pwince over there fled to this place. He's just a pitiful human who got sick of his country and ended up seeking out his salvation in monsters! Since we're here,

I might as well tell you all about that little pwince.”

Almost as if he were narrating a story, the Vampire King began unraveling the tale of Prince Neon.

Once upon a time, in a certain empire in the north, there lived a prince who had been betrayed by humans so many times that the lock of his heart only opened for monsters. One by one, his enemies inside the empire fell by his hand, and the people held the young boy in reverence as the God of Death, Thanatos.

The prince could use his very words to bend the laws of nature. How could a normal human ever keep him in check? Seeing him as a volatile creature, the powerful nobles that once supported him politically shuffled away and abandoned him. The number of assassination attempts only grew and grew, and at some point, the prince had lost count.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the other princes eventually saw him as a common threat and joined forces, conspiring to end Prince Neon once and for all. The monsters under his command were killed one by one, and the prince was driven to a corner. Fearful of the possibility of death, the prince ran away from the empire with his tail between his legs.

A coward—that was what Giabalham called him.

I lost track of time. How many minutes had passed since I’d begun casting *The Four Halos*? I kept a tight leash on my concentration, not allowing it to slip even for one second as I continued to restrain the Vampire King, who had fallen to the ground.

The only thing I could do was listen to Giabalham’s ramblings in silence.

“Surely you know better now—if I had to define him, that little pwince is just as despicable as the rest of us vampires. He’s not worth sacrificing your life for at all. He’s probably going to die after he returns to the empire, after all.”

I offered no response. Maintaining this spell over a long period of time blurred my memories. Blood wouldn’t flow to my brain. If I lost focus, I’d start losing blood out of my nose. Actually, I already was, trails of crimson streaking down my upper lip.

But I endured. All I could do was endure.

“You’re sooo weird.”

I wanted to hiss at him, *Shut up*. But if I opened my mouth, if I let even a fraction of the power behind my spell wane... This vampire would jump at the first sign of an opening—I was sure of it.

“What a surprise, though. You were able to pin me down for so long! I pity your foolish bravery, so I’ll tell you something. Sunlight doesn’t work on me. Only incompetent Red Eyes would shy away from the light of day.”

My effort was meaningless—that was what the Vampire King with black eyes implied, trying to plant the seeds of doubt in my heart once more.

“Nobody will come to help you either. The djinn that controlled the arisen is half dead, and that was my work. Oualdi’s probably tearing it limb from limb right about now.”

The Night of the Arisen didn’t seem to be ending any time soon, because their puppeteer had a hole in her core and had not the strength to dispel them. But that was probably for the best. No one at the school had to see the swarm of vampires—the swarm of *terrors*—floating in the darkness of night.

The other vampires’ vicious mockery rang in my ears.

“Lord Giabalham! Please allow me to drink that human’s blood after you kill him! That human’s blood smells good!”

“Die already, mage!”

Their bloodlust pierced right through me, every word like another knife through my skin. Daybreak was still a long way off. If I stalled until the sun rose, every vampire other than Giabalham should vanish, at least. The sun was the bane of all vampires, after all.

“Wow, you’re a celebrity, southern mage. Let’s see... How about I kill you and feed your blood to the southern vampires? Maybe they’d grow a tiny bit stwonger from that.”

The only thing I could do was bind Giabalham, like a foolish one-trick pony. Pathetic. I faced only a single monster, but I was reduced to such a miserable state. If the people who regarded me as the great Dragon Slayer saw me, I’d die from shame.

Numerous creatures’ bloodlust rained down on me in a hail of figurative daggers, sending the skin on the back of my neck crawling. One lapse in concentration meant freedom for Giabalham—and it would be one instant before my death. *Jeez... How did it even come to this?*

Even *I* was appalled at myself. Why in the world was I so desperate to help the prince, regardless of the consequences? My first meeting with the prince had been *atrocious*, in my opinion. I had even avoided him like the plague at the beginning.

“Hm, time’s ticking. You’re reaching your limit, aren’t you?”

I was bitter, but I had to admit that my opponent had hit the nail on the head.

Cracking open my eyes ever so slightly, I saw that the Vampire King was *smoking a cigar* of all things. *So this is entertainment to him, huh? Don’t screw with me!*

Begrudgingly in my mind, I admitted, *Vampire King Giabalham, you’re a freak of nature compared to the monsters that occupied Huzak—to the fairy girl that led them all. I’ll give you that.*

“...Hey, vampire. You want...to know why I protect the prince? I'll...tell you why.”

I lifted one of my arms, almost as if I was shielding Prince Neon from Giabalham.

The vampire sounded intrigued. “Oh? Please do. Depending on your answer, I just might help you out.”

“You know, that guy...”

The yells of the vampires raked my eardrums, echoing out from somewhere behind me.

When Charlotte had told me about the rumors surrounding the prince at school, I'd been determined that I would stay the hell away from what smelled like trouble. Yet...

Ah. Speaking of which... Prince Neon, when I first saw you, didn't you say that you came here to make friends? And...even after everything that has happened, I still don't know whether that's true or not. After all, just as that vampire said...you, Neon Dustour, are a master at lying.

I muttered weakly, “That guy, he...”

But one day, I followed him on his chase and went into a dungeon with him. And then, after I finally saw the light of day after those torturously long days... We made our way back, a lengthy journey that lasted a few days. And, during that time...

I swallowed. “He...listened to what I had to say. And how could we not be—”

I'll be honest for once. On that day...

“—friends...after that...?”

Damn it all. Why the hell am I being forced to say such...ugh!

But thinking back... I must've thought of him as my friend that day, because he'd listened to what I had to say. Because he had lent an ear to the love song composed by my very soul without laughing at it, without looking at me like it was a joke.

To him, I was a boy born to a noble household in a faraway country who had fallen in love with the girl who'd always been by my side. And he had listened to me happily ramble away about my love story, about my love, then had congratulated me. Had rejoiced as if that had been his own tale.

He'd then told me how he was no different.

That was all he did. And that was more than enough reason for me to put my life on the line.

“Boooring. I hate stowies like these.”

Giabalham pulled. He was trying to force his way free of my magical bindings. I could feel the bloodlust pricking my neck like needles. Many vampires desired my death.

The Vampire King announced, "My subjects, you must be tired of waiting! Now, I shall tweek you to a feast of fresh mage blood!"

Then, a familiar voice yelled, "Stop!"

It was the prince, who'd blacked out after his fight with Giabalham. Other vampires were quick to hold him down. *Ah, he finally came to.*

He was screaming, caring not a whit for the vampires on him. "I...clearly told you that this is not your fight! Do not interfere with my battle! Even if my life ends here, I have no regrets!"

Prince Neon had always been majestic—dignified no matter what the situation was. But his desperate shout was heartbreaking to hear, and I had the urge to close my eyes out of anguish.

He continued to yell, "Gia! Even a creature like you should know mercy! He has managed to resist you for so long, so show him mercy! I command you!"

"Take a good look. So many of my kin thirst for his blood. The only thing I can do is slice off his head instantly to lessen his suffering."

Their voices sounded distant. Pathetic, so pathetic, I couldn't believe I'd even start losing my hearing. *Huh. So my death's drawing near, hm?*

But then. Among all the needles of bloodlust that pierced me, I sensed a familiar one. I couldn't stop a grin growing on my face, and the vampires began making a commotion.

"He's gone mad! Oh, please give me the honor of dealing the last blow!"

"Lord Giabalham! I beg that you give us his heart raw!"

The many vampires around thought that I'd gone crazy. Giabalham, despite being bound by my spell, lifted an arm with force. One of the rings broke, and the binds that'd shackled him dissipated. I could see the vampires' eyes gleaming, lusting after my blood. These guys were convinced that I was done for, and I found that so hilarious that a soundless laugh slipped past my lips.

"...I can't stand you guys," I muttered.

Nobody had remembered that man. Everyone here had looked down on his abilities. That thought was so laughable, so funny, that I smiled from the bottom of my heart, which swelled with pride.

A vampire spat, "You're going to die now. Why are you smiling?"

"That's because...all of you are morons."

I wouldn't call it a gamble. I knew his strength better than anyone else. I believed that he would definitely carry out my command. That was why I'd sent him there, despite knowing he'd have to face Giabalham's trusted subordinate.

The Vampire King then declared, "Okay, I've made up my mind.

I'll turn your heart into a steak and eat it myself."

I sneered. "I'd like to see you try, you bloodsucking bat."

It was a derogatory name that served as the ultimate insult to these creatures. Giabalham was so infuriated that he almost popped a vein in his forehead.

But I wasn't scared.

A shadow crept up closer and closer, deathly silent. The Vampire King was the only one who noticed that something was wrong, and his complexion paled even further. But it was already too late.

After all...

Adrenaline rushed through my veins, and I exclaimed, "Good job, Claude...!"

...it was the girl who took pride in being the guard of Dustour's second prince—the guard of Thanatos.

Where did she come from? That was a meaningless question.

She was there, and that was all there was to it. Her appearance behind the creature feared as the Vampire King was just like someone setting fire to the metaphorical kindling that was this battle.

The creature didn't even understand what had happened to him. Though I honestly wasn't much better, since I'd only noticed her arrival through my intuition.

Before Giabalham could utter a sound, blood gushed from his small mouth in a bright fountain of red.

And it was then that he finally managed to speak. "How..."

There was a large, gaping hole in his abdomen. A hand had thrust through it, pointed in my direction. A slender, snow-white hand clutched a beating, scarlet heart. The girl who had always seemed to look at something in the distance met my eyes for the first time.



“How... How are you still alive?! Oualdi! Where’s Oualdi?!”

She poked her head out from over the vampire’s shoulder. She was the picture of health, looking more energetic than I’d ever seen her, and there was no sign that the girl had been on death’s door such a short time ago. Her wounds had fully healed, and her breaths no longer came out shaky. Now, the panicked vampire’s blood was raining on Prince Neon’s beloved like a shower of rose petals.

Seeing that, I asked, “Hey... Do you see how awesome...Claude is...now?”

“Yeah, he was amazing. I’ve never seen that kind of thing before, so...” She tightened her grip, crushing the vampire’s heart in her hand. “...it’s my turn this time.”

Her declaration rang out in the night like a chime.

And what began next was a massacre. One lethal predator danced under the spotlight of the moon, reducing everything else to mere props.



I’d never experienced such a spectacular turn of tables before. The djinn were monsters hailed as the Envoys of Thanatos, and... *Wow. Just, wow. Having her on our side changed the tide completely.*

“Protect Lord Gia! He might just be an avatar, but he’s still made from a fragment of the original’s life!”

“Th-That’s impossible! We can’t do anything against her! Ugh, this is why I said we shouldn’t have gotten involved with him in the beginning! Who cares if he’s a noble True Ancestor or something?!”

That’s cheating, I thought numbly as I watched on. One wave of her arm was like the cue of the conductor of an orchestra, and vampires fell from the skies one after another. The colors of their eyes didn’t matter to her—when she was as right as rain, they were all helpless prey before her.

“Lord Gia was supposed to kill the djinn, wasn’t he?! He didn’t tell us that we’d have to fight a djinn at its prime!”

“Where is Lord Oualdi?! He went to finish it off! None of our kin assigned to that task came back!”

“All our clansmen that came close to the djinn have completely vanished without a trace!”

“There’s a monster, a monster! There’s another one over there! A body’s growing out of that sword!”

During my investigation on djinn, I’d come across a lot of unbelievable tales about them. They could touch the life force in living beings, nothing was indestructible before them... Suz honestly sounded more like a legendary monster in a fairy tale. In her eyes, the

world was probably quite a different place.

“Distance doesn’t matter to a djinn! Don’t run away and give it more time to act!”

She appeared no different than any normal human, but what she did was anything but normal—she was eliminating vampires like they were little more than annoying pests. *Now* who was the entertainment? It was a magnificent spectacle.

Prince Neon had been right. Having her as his bodyguard was more than enough. And with that thought, suddenly, all strength left my body, and I whimpered out a feeble, “Oiiink...”

My exhaustion from pinning Giabalham came crashing back down on me, and I collapsed onto my backside next to Prince Neon, who had decided to sit back and watch. The prince had reacted in the same way as Giabalham after he’d seen her return alive—with disbelief. It seemed that in their minds, it was impossible to save Suz from her grisly fate.

“Piggy Duke... How did you notice her appearance here?”

“Her bloodlust.”

“Her...bloodlust, you say?”

“Well, hers is a little special. She makes my neck tingle. You know how we went into that dungeon? I experienced her bloodlust countless times back then, so I got used to it. Though, well... I first started taking note of it when I ordered Claude to attack her so that you’d approve of him.”

“Being unable to suppress her bloodlust fully is a sign of inexperience. That was what I had assumed. To think that it would become useful one day...”

Prince Neon turned to look at the girl who was still in the middle of a fierce battle. *Oh, look at that.* A vampire tried to fly away, but she swatted them onto the ground like a bug, knocking them unconscious.

“In any case... The hi-elixir you used on Suz... You might never come across another one ever again. Do you not regret it?”

“Nah, it’s fine. I only got my hands on it through sheer coincidence, and I had no idea what to do with such a precious item, anyway.”

The hi-elixir was renowned for bringing back any living being from the brink of death. You couldn’t put a price on something so precious. But it’d been the only thing that came to my mind when I’d tried to think of a way to save her, which was why I had then issued a command to Claude. *“Go to the fourth floor of my dorms, head to my room, grab the hi-elixir, and let Suz drink it.”*

I continued, “I mean, in return, I got to see a djinn in battle, a legendary being known the world over. Plus, I think I’d never again get a ticket to a show where I could see vampires with golden eyes

being mowed down without any way to fight back.”

“...You should really consider being more selfish.”

As for the origins of the hi-elixir, I'd actually asked for it as a reward from the Great Spirit of Light for my accomplishment of ruining the Great Spirit of Darkness's plans. I'd originally planned to use it to save Shuya, since the Great Spirit of Fire was lurking deep inside his body.

Shuya Newkern and the Great Spirit of Fire shared one life, one fate, and I'd wanted to save him in a different way from the anime timeline. The hi-elixir had been essential for that, but I had no regrets about using it now.

“Ah, look, Your Highness. The battle is over. That was pretty fast.”

All the vampire subjects had fallen at Suz's hands, and now, only the Vampire King remained. Even after Suz had crushed his heart, he was still standing in mostly one piece, and he was observing the final moments of his comrades with a bored look on his face.

“Gia's main body is in his castle located in the north,” said Neon. “What you see here is only a fragmented part of his life force. Even if it is snuffed out, it would not be a big loss to the original.”

“Fragmenting one's life force... So in the north, there are monsters capable of such fearsome feats, huh?”

While we watched Suz's battle, Prince Neon taught me about Giabalham's most significant ability: his power to break off fragments of his life. It was what made him so terrifying.

“Now then, I suppose I shall do the honors of dealing the killing blow.” Prince Neon stood up, not caring for the half-naked state of his torso. “Ah, actually. Piggy Duke, I owe you one for that hi-elixir. I do not mind conceding the opportunity to kill a True Ancestor to you. It is rather rare to come by.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. The vampires of the north would bear a grudge against me, and I'd wake up every morning with even more unease than whenever I fell under the influence of the arisen.”

He barked out a laugh. “You have a point there. If that is what you wish, you may sit there. Keep your eyes peeled and watch as the True Ancestor loses his life.”

A lone vampire waited there for the prince's approach: Giabalham, a True Ancestor who had lost all his servants. His life span was absurdly long even among vampires, and he had his fragments to thank for that. He was an imposing presence in the north, and it wasn't often that he'd stick his neck out into the jaws of danger. Yet, this time, one of his fragments had to pay the price and lose its life.

Prince Neon had smirked when he'd told me that it was a feat that the masses would whisper in awe about for decades.

The prince and the vampire seemed to be talking about

something. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I didn't want to either. I really, *really* didn't want to involve myself in the affairs of the prince any further.

Next to the prince stood Suz, who was also muttering something to the arisen swimming in the air. She was a djinn, a monster shrouded in mystery. I didn't know the full extent of their powers or what they even were. If she was willing to answer, I'd love to bombard her with questions—questions like where she was born, what she could see, and so on. However, that would be pretty boorish of me to bring that kind of thing up under this night sky filled with enchanting, floating arisen.

I let out an “Ah.” The prince kicked Giabalham's head off like a ball. The vampire's body slowly turned into powdery ash that flitted about in the wind. Only his clothes remained, and Prince Neon seemed to be staring intently as this Giabalham disappeared for good.

The prince had his back facing me, and he was shaking.

“Aha ha! Listen to this, Piggy Duke! Giabalham said that he wants to turn you into his direct descendant! Be proud—the Vampire King himself gave you that offer!”

The Vampire King hadn't left in peace. At the very last moment, he'd given me the shock of the century.

Final Chapter: A New Seed of Discord

Learning to let go was very important in life. No matter what kind of shocking event happened, no matter how upset you felt, you had to learn to move on for your own sake. Basically, my advice was to forget troublesome stuff as quickly as possible.

I nodded to myself, snorting profoundly. It was my mastery of this life skill that allowed me to walk on nonchalantly, even though I'd recently weathered a storm in my life.

My footsteps echoed down the pristine, white corridor. The boisterous voices of my classmates weren't around to add color either.

I was on the third floor of the medical building, a bastion of rest in this school. There were courtyards and ponds on the premises, and this building served as a place that restored mental health as well as physical.

Why was I in this sanctuary of healing? Well, I was on my way to visit a certain someone. Yes, the guy who could be said to be the secret lead actor behind the scenes, the other key to the resolution of that incident—Professor Claude.

“My, Lord Denning. Are you here to visit our patient again, perhaps?”

I squeaked. “Oink?!”

The source of the voice was the female staff member with a stout physique. She had been the one at her wits' end when Shuya had tried to escape for the umpteenth time. After the incident was over, Shuya didn't have anything to do with the medical building anymore, and she'd once mentioned things were a little too quiet around here recently.

She looked at the item in my hand, then she creased her eyebrows. “Lord Denning, the regulations state that such hazardous items are prohibited in this area.”

“This is actually something Claude left in my care temporarily. He is technically a knight at the end of the day, and he wished to check on the state of his sword.”

“Ah, I see. Oh, but a great knight of House Denning is never ‘technically’ a knight, he is a glorious knight, at least in my eyes. Well, Professor Claude is very compassionate, so it is rather difficult to remember that sometimes.”

“Madam, how is Claude faring?”

“When he was first brought in, he looked like he was drained of all life. That gave us a scare, but he is making a swift recovery. If he maintains that, he might be able to leave the medical building the day after tomorrow or so. But the professor looked as if someone sucked out his energy and was very lethargic... What in the world happened? Do you have any idea, Lord Denning? Probably not.”

“Wh-Who knows?”

“The closest match I can think of is having your vitality drained by a mimic, but... That can’t be it, surely.”

I let out a strained laugh.

There were some monsters in this world which would disguise themselves as any item—mimics. And it might surprise you to hear that there was a certain mimic that disguised itself as a sword. *Bizarre, I know.* The longsword Claude owned, Grim, was exactly that. It wasn’t truly a sword—it was a monster.

An immature mimic didn’t have a defined shape, a little like slimes. As they came into maturity, they’d change their appearance. I had absolutely no clue what this guy was smoking when it decided to turn into a sword. However, its owner, Claude, seemed to know the full story. In fact, they even empathized with each other’s values in life... Nobody could beat Claude’s ability to adapt, and that wasn’t an exaggeration.

“Huh? Lord Denning...” The nurse frowned. “Did that sword just move?”

“No, not at all, how could it? Okay, I shall take my leave now, please excuse me.”

I could see the question marks above her head, but I left the area quickly.

“Oi, Grim,” I hissed. “Don’t move around, you hear me?”

It moved in silent protest.

This sword was one of House Denning’s prized possessions—not a sword but in truth, a monster that my ancestor had sealed away in ancient times. It could even count as a cursed weapon, and Claude, blinded by the impulse that came with his youth, had attempted to possess it. Normally, such an action would result in...an untimely end at the hands of my father.

However, Grim had taken a liking to Claude. It was very rare for a mimic to show interest in any human, and that was why my old man had also been fond of Claude. House Denning probably chose Claude to be the Sentinel for influential figures of every country because they had placed high expectations on Grim’s power.

“If you dare fidget without permission again, I won’t give you any of my mana.”

Silence. It went still.

Grim had guzzled up all the monsters that had been defeated that night, leaving behind not a single trace. That was why, on the next day, everyone had been none the wiser about the ferocious battle that had taken place the night before. When it tried to eat the slumbering Shuya as well, though, I almost thought I'd have a heart attack.

This sword, Grim, liked Claude. I'd been sure that it would unleash its full powers to protect the man if there were any true threat to his life. Well, Claude ended up being confined to bed for a period because of that. Activating this sword put a huge strain on its wielder, since it stole their vitality away.

The grim reality was, unfortunately, Claude's gray hair would probably only grow more apparent.

Voices drifted out of Claude's room, and my feet stopped of their own accord.

"Professor Claude! When are you going to recover from your food poisoning?! It's been ages!"

Students seemed to have gathered there.

"I can't believe that you got an upset stomach because you ate dubious food off the ground like Denning, Professor!"

Claude sounded apologetic. "I promised all of you that I would help you with your exam preparation, but I am afraid that is impossible in this state. I am very sorry that I cannot keep that promise."

"We're totally fine, so please! Get some proper rest, Professor!"

Claude's health had deteriorated abruptly, and I hadn't been able to come up with a good reason to convince everyone. Thus, I'd lied through my teeth and said that he had an upset stomach because he'd eaten something weird.

But uh, all that aside, it's so lively and harmonious here despite it being a medical ward. His popularity with the students was up there as always, and I was hesitant to go in as an outsider.

The sword in my hand wriggled.

"Hey, I told you to not move. You're a sword, remember?"

Guess I have no choice but to hold on to this morbid sword just a little while longer, huh?

The air was cool and refreshing, and while enjoying the pleasant weather outside, I headed towards the dining hall at noon. The sword was still in my hand. I sat down with a loud thud, and a few people looked my way, but they quickly returned to chatting happily with each other.

That reaction made a little spark of joy dance in my heart. The

fearsome blackhearted Piggy Duke was nowhere to be found. In their eyes, I was just another student, and though I'd slay a dragon or two sometimes, I was still a harmless little piggy.

I could hear their chatter.

"He suddenly went poof. I wonder where he is now."

"I mean, we couldn't wait for him to leave when he was here, but after he was gone, I actually feel it's too quiet around school. Prince Neon really made a big impact on us all, huh?"

I called out to the maid serving me, snorting. "Hey, Miss Maid! I'm waiting for someone, so could you come back later, please?"

Until a little while ago, the dining hall had been as desolate at lunch time as an abandoned mansion, but that was all in the past. After all, the famous—calling him infamous might be more accurate—person behind all the ruckus at school had suddenly disappeared along with his retainer without any notice.

"Hey, did you hear this? They actually call Prince Neon 'Thanatos' back in the empire."

"Oh guys, you know how there was the rumor about the prince's retainer wandering around the crematorium? There's an update! Now, *Shuya* of all people has been sticking around there whenever he has free time."

But I didn't miss the prince too much. On the day of his disappearance, after my last lecture, I'd returned to my room to find a memo on my table. There was only one sentence on it, and it informed me that he was going to return to the empire. It'd been accompanied by a fluffy white plush toy next to it—where did he even find this thing? *That prick... Did he give it because he thought it looks like an arisen or something?*

"Master Slowe! Sorry for the wait! Huh? You haven't started eating yet? Aw, I told you to go ahead without me because I'd be late!"

I shrugged. "Well, it always tastes better when I'm eating with you, after all."

I hummed to myself in a tune of snorts. *Yeah, the faster you forget about annoying incidents, the better.* I never wanted to recall the memory of vampires invading the school like a swarm of stealthy locusts. Even the thought of the incident repulsed me, but I couldn't control where my feet were taking me.

Corpses of countless monsters slept under these grass fields I was walking into. In this corner of the campus, students were scarce. And on this disorderly plain stood a solitary boy.

I sighed. "That guy still hasn't gotten sick of it?"

The guy with red hair waved his wand around while chanting

something. No wonder people started gossiping that Shuya was going through one of his weird phases yet again. He looked like a lunatic, to put it mildly.

“Shuuuya! What are you still doing here?”

The resentment of the monsters clinging to their remains had attracted arisen here. I couldn’t deny that. However, it wasn’t anything too extreme, and they wouldn’t influence humans in any way unless a djinn like Suz unleashed her powers. Thus, there was no point fretting about them now that she’d left the school. That was what Prince Neon had told me, and I’d passed all of that on to Shuya word for word.

“Did you forget what I told you last time?! Purifying this area would be a waste of your time!”

After that incident—after Suz stopped visiting the infirmary—Professor Arle’s health had made a miraculous rebound. Yet, Shuya wouldn’t stop purifying this place, declaring that it was his last unfinished job.

He finally replied, sounding unimpressed. “It’s *you*, Denning. Look who’s talking. Didn’t you say yesterday that you wouldn’t come here again?”

“Well, word on the street is, you’ve gone on one of your rampages again, so I came to see it for myself.”

“Ugh, I’m just doing this for myself, okay?! I was completely useless that night!”

“You’re always so stubborn...”

“Pot, meet kettle. You come here every day too. I bet you can’t move on from that night.”

I shrugged. “You can’t blame me. That was pretty impactful.”

Prince Neon had put up a solitary resistance against monsters every night on this campus. To prevent the people at school from being dragged in, he had gathered a ridiculous number of arisen. What that resulted in was enough arisen in the air to nearly blot out the night sky, and they swam around in the darkness like petals of light—a scene out of a fairy tale.

It had been a tug-of-war between the second prince of Dustour and the monsters his father had deployed. And...Shuya was, well, kind of right. That night clung to the back of my mind like sticky oil, and I could probably never be rid of it even if I wanted to.

Perhaps Shuya had recalled something that left a lasting impression on him, because he stopped his monotonous ritual of single-mindedly casting *Purifyre* and began talking. “You know, Denning? Unlike you, I hated that prince. He threw this school into the jaws of danger to grant his own wish, and many times, I thought about exposing his horrific plan to the staff. But...” His voice faltered.

“Whenever I cast *Purifyre* here, I can’t help but think... Liking someone to that extent is something I can’t even fathom. It’s amazing. Because that means the prince would choose that girl in a heartbeat over the lives of hundreds, or even thousands of people, right?”

“Well, it’s probably impossible for you to make the same choice as the prince, I can guarantee that. After all, you’re such a softie that even the prince managed to take advantage of it, despite him being a new face around here.”

“...Even *you* think I’m a softie?”

“I sure do.”

That was the end of the conversation. Shuya went quiet again and resumed waving his wand around with fervor. He fired off *Purifyre* incessantly, as if it was a way to vent his frustration.

I stared at him with a raised eyebrow. Sure, Prince Neon had involved Kirsch in unnecessary conflict, but those vampires hadn’t attacked the school nor seemed like they planned to, so either way, the nightmare scenario wouldn’t have come to pass. If I looked at it that way, Prince Neon was just as much of a big softie as Shuya.

“All righty then...” *I guess I’ll show him the difference between us by casting Heal.*

This guy had been casting that *Purifyre* every single day lately, so his skill in magic seemed to have increased pretty significantly. But I should teach him that hey, there was always a bigger fish.

I was merrily cooking up my evil scheme of making his life miserable, but then, he stopped casting and casually dropped a verbal bomb onto my head.

“Ah, right. I heard it from Alicia a while back, but uh, what was it again? The second engagement between you two or something? Is gonna be announced soon, right?”

“...Oink?”

“I know that this sounds weird coming from me and all, but... Hey. Take good care of Alicia and make her happy, okay?”

What.

What the heck.

My whole body felt numb.

And what’s with that look on his face? Excuse me, why the heck does he look proud-embarrassed, as if he just said a quote that would go down in history books?

And most important of all, *what the heck did he just say?!*

Afterword

I attempted drinking all night for the first time in a long while. Usually, I go out drinking around once a week. I was in a great mood that day, and the izakaya bar was just barely within the distance of a taxi ride, so I just kept chugging. But around the one-hour mark, I could hear the footsteps of regret sneaking up on me, telling me I should've gone home earlier after all.

Around two in the morning, it had evolved into a battle between me and my drowsiness, and in the end, three in the morning had been my limit. Since there were only around two train stations between the bar and my house, I ended up leaving early by taxi.

During my university days, drinking all night then going straight to class after that was a normal part of my routine, and was even a breeze... Nowadays, whenever I recall those years, I'm forced to face the reality that I'm losing the magic of youth. I considered working out at gyms so that I could regain my youth, but from experience, I learned that I would always get sick of it in the end and stop midway. So... Maybe not.

Now then, *Piggy Duke* volume eight. This time, the tone's a little different, and the fantasy elements are stronger. Our anime protagonist, Shuya, also managed to one-up our little piggy just a tad. In terms of ability, our piggy is many levels above Shuya, but in terms of getting into trouble... Shuya is definitely a respectable opponent.

And from a distance, Charlotte and Alicia watch over these two. In the next volume, Alicia miiight just be the lead actress.

Here, I would like to thank everyone that was involved in volume eight. Without all of you, this wouldn't have been possible.

See you again!

Rhythm Aida
(Published August 20, 2019)



Reincarnated
as the **Piggy Duke**

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



"All bark
and no bite.
I find that
describes you
perfectly."

Neon Dustour

Second prince of Dustoir. A sudden exchange student at Kirsch.

His eyes were windows to an unyielding soul. Looking into them gave the impression that he could do no wrong. This man was powerful, and he had an attitude to boot. His very presence was enough to make people feel inferior.

"Hey...
Do you
have beef
with me or
something?"

"Hey!
You take
that back!"

Shuya Newkern

A hot-blooded fortune-teller and a fire mage. Slowe considers Shuya his rival.

Slowe Denning

The protagonist who reincarnated into the world of his favorite anime. The third son of House Denning, and a problem student at Kirsch Mage Institute. At least, he used to be...?



"Yes, you are
right, we like
each other.
Happy now? So
what? Leave
me alone."

*Suz's interest in me
had been a big, fat
zero. Now, she was
leaning in, curious
about my relationship
with Charlotte.*

"I also want
to know...
Do you like
her, Slowe?"

Suz
Neon's retainer. She seems
to have a big secret...



To the foreign prince, I was a boy
born to a noble household in a faraway
country who had fallen in love with the
girl who'd always been by my side. And
he had listened to me happily ramble
away about my love story, about my love.
Then he told me that he was the same.
And that was more than enough reason
for me to put my life on the line.

"I'll show
you my
weapon."

"Ha ha, that
sounds scary.
But how about
you stop the
futile struggle
and admit
defeat already?"

Giabaltham
The Vampire King. An assassin
dispatched by the Dustour
Emperor.

"Neon...
is my
friend!"

Translator's Notes

Welcome back to this latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, as well as some weird Japanese history along the way. So let's jump right into it!

Prologue: A Sweet Life

Doubt and paranoia

Slowe overreacts to one of the maid's reaction at the dining hall, and the original term here can be loosely translated as "doubt and seeing demons in the shadows." Interestingly enough, the *gishin* ("doubt") here is a Buddhist term—you've no doubt seen many of these throughout the various translator's notes—and it's one of the five hindrances: doubt, or the lack of conviction or faith in one's abilities.

The term is used to describe paranoia—that is, the idea that if you have a seed of doubt in your heart, you'll start fearing and questioning everything. It is said to have first appeared in *Liezi*, an ancient Chinese text attributed to the philosopher Lie Yukou. The book tells the story about a man who loses his large woodcutting ax. He suspects his neighbor's young son is the culprit, and he begins to scrutinize every single thing the boy does—the way he walks, the way he talks, the way he acts...

The twist is that one day, he finds the ax at the bottom of a gorge nearby and realizes that he'd forgotten he'd left it there, which meant that he'd been completely mistaken. From that day on, the boy no longer seems suspicious to the man at all. The moral of the story led to the birth of this saying: "Doubt in your heart makes you see demons in the shadows."

Person who doesn't deliver

When Tina eats in the abandoned dining hall and stares in fright at the "perpetrator," Slowe, before she realizes his identity. Perpetrator here is *futodokimono*, literally "a person who doesn't deliver/reach." The term originally referred to criminals, since in older Japanese, the word for "deliver/reach" also applied to laws and

morals. A person whose heart isn't "delivered" to law would then commit crimes, becoming a "person who doesn't deliver." The meaning changed over time, and "not delivering" began to refer to insolent acts or thoughtlessness as well.

However, people don't use this term very often nowadays. You'd probably have better luck finding it in a historical Japanese drama when *bugyou*, feudal samurai officials, denounce criminals with this term. Thus, when Slowe describes himself as a "person who doesn't deliver," it comes across as quite comical.

Before breakfast

Slowe mentions that orcs are pieces of cake to him. The term used here is literally "before breakfast," used to describe very easy tasks. Jobs that can be completed before breakfast are deemed easy, since you're working on an empty stomach and on a tight schedule. Thus, this metaphor was born.

Until the mid-Edo period, the general practice in Japan was to have two meals a day—breakfast and dinner. It was often said that people felt weak before breakfast because of the few meals they had, which means that one could accomplish only the most basic things then. Diving a little more into the food culture of the pre-Edo era, in the Nara period, Heian period, and to some extent in the Kamakura period, having more than two meals a day was actually seen as improper and even unbelievable, especially for nobility.

The Heian nobility had a very interesting schedule. Normally, breakfast for Heian nobility was held around 10 a.m., while dinner was held at 4 p.m. The day of a Heian noble started very early—at 3 a.m. They would then perform a series of complicated morning rites (divination, cleaning teeth with a toothpick, writing a diary entry of the previous day, and so on) before getting ready for work. Some would have hard porridge before leaving for work, but this counted as a snack and not an official meal.

Work, meanwhile, began at around 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. and ended at around 11 a.m. They could then finally have their first meal of their day—breakfast between 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.—after returning home. Until dinner at 4 p.m., they were free to do whatever they wished. There were sometimes banquets after sunset, but those were not seen as official meals. Soldiers, farmers, and craftsmen like carpenters, however, were allowed to eat in between the two main meals.

The shift from two meals a day to three meals a day was the most noticeable in the mid-Edo period, and there are a few theories about what caused it. One theory states that it was the influence of the Great Fire of Meireki in 1657, which destroyed around sixty to seventy percent of Edo, where modern Tokyo now lies. To reconstruct the city,

craftsmen like carpenters and plasterers were assembled from all over the country. Since their jobs consisted of intensive manual labor, two meals a day just didn't cut it. But because they couldn't just return home to eat whenever they got hungry, the food service industry suddenly boomed as food stalls and restaurants began popping up all over Edo.

A second theory involves rapeseed oil. Around the Edo period, the distribution network of goods became much more efficient, and rapeseed oil used for lamps and illumination became more widely available. The waking hours in a day therefore increased, which was part of the reason three meals a day made more sense. Until then, the lower social classes had used fish oil in their *andon*, or standing paper lamps, but they reeked with an unbearable stench and they'd leave a terrible amount of soot on the rooms' interiors. And even if they wanted to use rapeseed oil, what was available on the market was so refined that it was used for cooking as well, and it cost a fortune. One *shou* unit (approximately 1.8 liters) of rapeseed oil cost the same as two *shou* units of rice. Therefore, commoners mostly slept as soon as the sun set.

As the price of rapeseed oil fell, it became more affordable for commoners, and more and more of them began to work or go out to have fun at night. The waking hours of a day increased, and naturally, people began spacing out their meals into three times a day. Hence why Slowe's remarks make it even more clear just how easy the task was for him!

Zihan's Bonus Round: Candles in Ancient Japan

How about a bit of extra trivia, as a treat? On the topic of Japan's lighting history, as you can see from the above, oil lamps were their main light source. Candles, meanwhile, were pretty much nowhere to be seen. (I had the honor of visiting a Japanese candle and lamp museum in the town of Obuse, Nagano prefecture once: the Nihonnoakari Museum, and it was a very enlightening experience.) Candles actually came to Japan quite early, around the Nara period (around 710 to 784 AD). Candles were said to have arrived in Japan with the introduction of Buddhism, and the ones imported from China were made of beeswax. However, after the Japanese missions to Tang China stopped in 894, Japan didn't have any means of obtaining new candles, so they began manufacturing their own.

The oldest candles used in Japan were made of beeswax, but as they experimented, they started making candles out of pine resin. Eventually, they arrived at the Japanese Hazenoki tree and the Chinese lacquer tree, which became the two most famous ingredients for Japanese candles. These candles were completely plant-based,

unlike the older European candles made from animal fats, due in large part to the Buddhist belief of the time that killing an animal you rear can be equivalent to killing an ancestor due to the cycle of death and rebirth—the pig you are eyeing might be your great-great-great-grandma! Japan had to rely heavily on imported ingredients to make their candles until the Muromachi period, and candles were only used by the Imperial Court, nobles, and select temples. During the Edo period, the distribution network of goods became more efficient, and by the end of the Edo period, some common folk could finally get their hands on candles.

By the Meiji period, candles were relatively affordable, and could be found throughout all of Japan. However, this was also around the time that kerosene lamps were brought into Japan, and that quickly became the main type of home lighting. Gas lights were used on the streets, but did not extend to homes. In the Taisho period, light bulbs took over, and the era of electricity dawned. All in all, candles didn't really have a place in the daily lives of common folk in Japanese history.

Chapter 3: Dungeons and Arisen

Cheating

Slowe wonders whether Shuya was trying to get information about last year's test, and he accuses him of cheating. Cheating, especially in tests or exams, is called "cunning" in Japanese. (Yes, it's pseudo-English, much like how the word for "dress" is literally the English words "one piece.") The theory is that a student in the Meiji period spread the meaning of the English word "cunning," and it became a code word for cheating in exams.

"Cunning" then led to the term *kanning peepaa* ("cunning paper"), or a cheat sheet. It has two meanings; the first is, of course, a scrap of paper someone sneaks into an exam, and the second is actually a broadcasting term referring to the cue cards (usually written) used during TV broadcasts to relay messages to actors or give instructions.

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her
How I Feel! Volume 8
by Rhythm Aida

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Edited by Ori Starling

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